

PALMYRA

A History

MICHAEL SOMMER

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Palmyra

Palmyra: A History examines Palmyra, the city in the Syrian oasis of Tadmur, from its beginnings in the Bronze Age, through the classical period and its discovery and excavation, to the present day. It aims at reconstructing Palmyra's past from literary accounts – classical and post-classical – as well as material evidence of all kinds: inscriptions, coins, art and of course the remains of Palmyra's monumental architecture.

After exploring the earliest inhabitation of Tadmur, the volume moves through the Persian and Hellenistic periods, to the city's zenith. Under the Romans, Palmyra was unique among the cities of the empire because it became a political factor in its own right in the third century AD, when the Roman military was overpowered by Sassanian invaders and Palmyrene troops stepped in. Sommer's assessment of Palmyra under Rome therefore considers how Palmyra achieved such an exceptional role in the Roman Near East, before its demise under the Umayyad Empire. The volume also examines the century-long history of archaeological and historical research at Palmyra, from its beginnings under Ottoman rule and the French mandate in the 1920s to the recent satellite-based prospection carried out by German archaeologists. A closing chapter examines the occupation of the site by ISIS during the Syrian conflict, and the implications of the destruction there on the ruins, the archaeological finds and future investigations, and heritage in Syria more broadly.

Palmyra offers academics, students and the interested reader alike the first full treatment in English of this fascinating site, providing a comprehensive account of the city's origins, rise and fall.

Michael Sommer is Professor of Ancient History at the Carl von Ossietzky University of Oldenburg, Germany.

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Michael Sommer

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Preface

Until recently, Palmyra has been one of the most fertile grounds for research in the archaeology of the wider Roman world. With its impressive cityscape, monumental architecture and rich epigraphic record, Palmyra bore witness to a great, yet mysterious civilization on the fringes of classical antiquity's largest and most durable empire. Was the trading hub in the midst of the Syrian Desert an outpost of the West in the East, a Greek city in a Near Eastern environment? Or was it, on the contrary, as oriental in style as it was in substance? What we make of Palmyra's dozen years on the stage of world history – the city's sudden appearance there in the wake of the Persian king Shapur's crushing victory over the emperor Valerian and its likewise sudden disappearance from that stage following Aurelian's victory over Zenobia – largely depends on how we answer this one big question: East or West?

While Palmyra's political role and cultural affiliation are still disputed in classical and archaeological scholarship, there is little doubt about Palmyra's role in the trans-Eurasian long-distance trade. If any urban settlement of the classical world ever came near to being a “global” city, it was certainly Palmyra. Traders from the oasis operated across the Roman Empire and as far as the western coast of the Indian subcontinent. They crossed the Syrian Desert and the plains of Mesopotamia to the shores of the Persian Gulf, from where they sailed across the Indian Ocean, reaching the luxury goods from South Asia and the Far East which were traded in the ports of India.

Palmyrenes were multicultural, polyglot and cosmopolitan. They were the exact opposite of the terror militias commanded by the so-called Islamic State who took the ruins of Palmyra – and the modern town – from Syrian government forces in May 2015. At once, there was an outcry of indignation from the Western public when the jihadists started their iconoclastic demolition of some of Palmyra's treasures. Palmyra is a monument to “openness, generosity to other cultures – and above all the ideal of religious and intellectual freedom and tolerance,” wrote the then mayor of London, Boris Johnson, in the *Daily Telegraph*. This view is anachronistic. When adopting the components of other cultures and adapting them to their own needs, the Palmyrenes were anything but generous. They were just pragmatic. And the religious pluralism we can observe in ancient

Palmyra does not pay witness to any form of tolerance, but simply to a religious climate which did not yet know the meaning of the word “faith.”

This book does not intend to make Palmyra a catch-all symbol of fluid or anachronistic ideas. It simply wants to be “a history”: a reconstruction of Palmyra’s past, of which the Roman imperial period, from the first to the third century AD, is of course the most important piece. But this story cannot be told solely on the grounds of evidence from Palmyra itself. The oasis of Tadmur, from time immemorial, formed part of a rich cultural landscape stretching from the Mediterranean to as far as western Iran. In this landscape, empires and tribes were powerful political agents at all times. The history of Palmyra, its trade, religion and politics cannot be detached from their environment. This is why the great empires of the ancient Near East and of the Hellenistic world, the petty kingdoms alongside Rome’s eastern provinces, the tribes of Syria, Mesopotamia and the Arabian Peninsula, and even the Phoenicians, Palmyra’s Levantine forerunners in the business of long-distance trade, all belong to such a history. In return, Palmyra and the Palmyrenes shed light on the Roman world, to which they belonged: if at all, this world can best be understood from its periphery. Representing a singularity in this world, Palmyra is emblematic for the Roman Empire’s stunning ability to cope with diversity, an ability altogether lost in the modern Near East.

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Abbreviations

AE	Année Epigraphique
ARMT	Archives royales de Mari
CIG	Corpus Inscriptionum Graecarum
CIL	Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum
CIS	Corpus Inscriptionum Semiticarum
EL	Eisser/Lewy, Die altassyrischen Rechtsurkunden von Kültepe
FGrH	Fragmente der griechischen Historiker
IDR	Inscriptiones Daciae Romanae
IGR	Inscriptiones Graecae ad res Romanae pertinentes
IGLS	Inscriptions Grecques et Latines de la Syrie
Inv.	Inventaire des Inscriptions de Palmyre
KBo	Keilschrifttexte aus Boghazköi
OGIS	Orientis Graeci Inscriptiones Selectae
PAT	Palmyrene Aramaic Texts
TC	Tablettes cappadociennes

Unless otherwise stated, all abbreviations for ancient authors and texts follow those used in Brill's *New Pauly*.



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1 Avenues to Palmyra

*Euphrates' cities and
Palmyra's streets and you
Forests of columns in the level desert
What are you now?
Your crowns, because
You crossed the boundary
Of breath,
Were taken off
In Heaven's smoke and flame;
But I sit under clouds (each one
Of which has peace) among
The ordered oaks, upon
The deer's heath, and strange
And dead the ghosts of the blessed ones
Appear to me.¹*

Friedrich Hölderlin

Thus wrote, more than 200 years ago, Friedrich Hölderlin. In his poem “Ages of Life,” he sang of the hubris of a great civilization that had “crossed the boundaries” of man (“of breath”). “Euphrates’ cities” hint at the Babylon of the Hebrew Bible and the Whore of Babylon from the New Testament. “Smoke and flame” is a biblical reminiscence, too: “And I will give miraculous signs in heaven and on earth: blood, fire and smoke,” as Martin Luther translated the prophet Joel.² Palmyra has been visited by Western travellers ever since the seventeenth century. With its “pillared forests,” to Hölderlin it stands symbolically for the ruined civilization of antiquity, to which he contrasts the idyll of pure nature, unaffected by human activity. Everything, including the “crowns” of historical greatness, will perish, not a single “age of life” has survived so far.

Rediscovery

Hölderlin was inspired by the French philosopher Constantin François Comte de Volney (1757–1820), who published his thoughts on the decline of great empires

2 Avenues to Palmyra

in an essay entitled *Les Ruines Ou Méditations Sur Les Révolutions des Empires*. The essay is actually a poem in prose: a spirit takes Volney's poetic self by the hand and explains to him, facing the ruinous landscape in the middle of the Syrian Desert the meaning of Palmyra and its destruction. Civilizations come and go, explains the spirit, but ultimately progress prevails over backwardness. In the face of the French Revolution and its devastation, the treatise pleads for cautious optimism, and with this optimism the poetic self is inspired through the relics of a great past. Despite all sadness, he accepts that the old must fall to make room for the new.

Volney himself had visited Palmyra on an extensive journey through the Ottoman Near East, recording his impressions in a travel report.³ By no means did the French aristocrat, when he left for Constantinople, walk off the beaten track. As early as 1160, till 1173, the Spanish Jew Benjamin of Tudela visited Syria, the Holy Land and Mesopotamia. He claims to have visited "Tarmod" on this trip, the city "in solitude" built by Solomon. He claimed to have seen buildings made of "huge stones" there, similar to those in Baalbek. "Tarmod," which is undoubtedly Tadmor – as Palmyra is called in Hebrew – was also home to a Jewish community of 2,000 souls. According to Benjamin, they were experienced warriors and "sided sometimes with the Christians, sometimes with the Arabs."⁴

Benjamin may have indeed been in Palmyra. But his report may also be a fake, though a well-crafted one. After all, the number of 2,000 Jews seems vastly exaggerated. The first European travellers of the modern era to reach the Near East, the Italian Pietro della Valle and the Frenchman Jean-Baptiste Tavernier, both sidestepped the oasis of Tadmur, to get straight to Mesopotamia and Persia. Apparently, the journey through the Syrian Desert entailed great dangers, originating mainly from the Bedouins. The Portuguese Jesuit Manuel Godinho claimed that, on his visit to Syria in 1663, he had come sufficiently close to Palmyra to spot columns, towers, aqueducts and a large marble building similar to Solomon's Temple, undoubtedly the Temple of Bēl.⁵ A few years after Godinho's trip to the Syrian Desert, in the summer of 1678, 16 merchants working for the British Levant Company at Aleppo undertook an expedition to the oasis city, but were captured by the tribal warriors of the emir Melkam, to be released only after a high ransom had been paid. Yet, they returned in 1691. This time they were accompanied by William Halifax, an Oxford don and clergyman, who had served as chaplain of the British merchant colony at Aleppo since 1688. On 4 October, after a six-day journey, the expedition reached Palmyra, where the travellers stayed for four days. On 16 October, they returned safe and sound to Aleppo.

Halifax gave the Royal Society in London a detailed account of the journey, to be published in the Society's *Philosophical Transactions* in 1695, culminating in the assertion that no city in the world could rival the splendour of Palmyra.⁶ Halifax described the Temple of Bēl and the "Arabick Inscriptions" to be found there. He continued with descriptions of the Tripylon, the Great Colonnade, the mosque at the city centre and the "Little Temple," later to be called the Temple

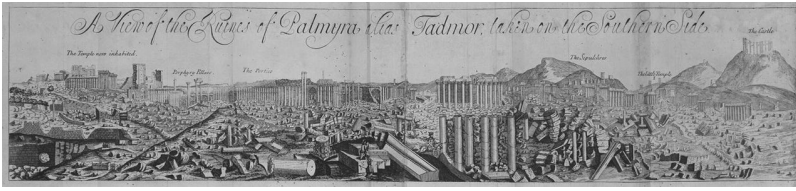


Figure 1.1 *A View of the Ruines of Palmyra alias Tadmor taken on the Southern Side*, anonymous copperplate engraving, *Phil. Trans. R. Soc. Lond.* 218 (1695), 125.

of Ba 'al-Šamen. The report concludes with an impression from the Valley of the Tombs, whose buildings he believed to have been church towers. Halifax copied inscriptions, and an anonymous member of the expedition drew a view from the south-east, which was later published as a copper engraving (Figure 1.1.) in the *Philosophical Transactions*.⁷ During the same expedition, a sketch was drawn for a painting, which was painted in 1693 by the Dutch artist Gerard Hofstede van Essen, displaying a large panorama of the ruins.⁸

News of the expedition spread quickly across Europe, triggering, together with the publication of its observations in the *Philosophical Transactions*, a real Palmyra hype in science and arts. Researchers began to systematically collect the inscriptions of the ancient city and to analyse its epigraphic legacy. Travellers such as the Frenchmen Giraud and Sautet (1706), or their fellow countryman Claude Granger (1735), were drawn into the desert in ever-increasing numbers. Here, they marvelled at the ruins. Palmyra stimulated the imagination of painters and writers; Zenobia conquered the opera stages of Europe.⁹ Another breakthrough is marked by the trip to the Near East of British antiquarians Robert Wood and James Dawkins. The two academics, who were accompanied by the Italian architect, civil engineer and draftsman Giovanni Battista Borra, reached Palmyra in March 1751. Unlike previous travellers, who had mainly reported their impressions of the oasis city, Wood, Dawkins and Borra's approach was decidedly scientific. They took it upon themselves to precisely measure the architectural remains and to draw them professionally. The substantial volume produced by Wood in 1753, which was published simultaneously in England and France, together with its counterpart on Baalbek, set the standards in the documentation of ancient architecture. Like the meticulous studies of the Italian architect Giovanni Battista Piranesi, it greatly influenced Europe's neoclassical architecture of the period as well.¹⁰

Only one year after this work had been published, Abbé Jean-Jacques Barthélemy succeeded in deciphering the Palmyrene alphabet, making it possible for the inscriptions – of which, by then, large numbers had been collected – to be read.¹¹ In 1785, the French landscape painter and draftsman Louis François Cassas visited Syria, spending a whole month in Palmyra. During these weeks, he produced numerous architectural drawings, including one of the Temple of Bēl. He later published his impressions in an imaginative *Voyage pittoresque*, in which, true to the

spirit of the period, he uses the “Orient” as a screen for romantic constructions of otherness.¹² The first European woman to set foot in Palmyra was Lady Hester Stanhope, the niece of British Prime Minister William Pitt the Younger and self-proclaimed lady of the village of Joun. In 1813, escorted by the leaders of assorted tribes and leading a caravan of 22 camels, she entered Palmyra, where she was celebrated as a “new Zenobia.” Hundreds of girls stood on the consoles, which had adorned the columns since ancient times, waving palm-fronds as she rode along Palmyra’s main axis, the Great Colonnade.¹³

The German archaeologists Theodor Wiegand and Daniel Krencker were neither received by girls, nor by palm-fronds, when they first opened the fieldwork campaign in Palmyra in 1902, starting with it the area’s archaeological research in the proper sense. The mission of Wiegand, who had been in charge of the excavations at Priene since 1896, and Krencker, from Alsace, who had joined him as an architect, was not purely archaeological, but had a political component too. The German Empire pursued vital political and economic interests in its Ottoman counterpart, which had become even more important for the Wilhelmstrasse, Germany’s Foreign Office, since emperor Wilhelm II visited Palestine in 1898. In 1903, the construction of the Baghdad Railway began, which was financed by the Deutsche Bank, whose then director was Georg von Siemens, Wiegand’s father-in-law. Krencker and Wiegand, who returned to the oasis in 1917, along with other participants in the expedition, published their results in 1932 in a two-volume work, which can still be considered the benchmark for any research on the architecture of Palmyra. Not only does it provide photos and drawings of many of the city’s most important monuments – the Camp of Diocletian, the theatre, the temples of Ba‘al-Šamen, Nebu and Bēl, as well as the medieval citadel – but also the first plan of the ruins.¹⁴

Following the end of the First World War, 1918 saw the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. In 1920, the Treaty of Sanremo divided the Fertile Crescent among the victorious powers, Britain and France. Palmyra, along with the rest of Syria, came under French mandate. Starting from the 1920s, French archaeologists were therefore at the forefront of research and exploration in ancient Palmyra. In 1929, Henri Seyrig was appointed director general of the administration of antiquities for Syria and Lebanon; he was joined in his work by Daniel Schlumberger, like Krencker a native of Alsace. Assisted by the architects René Amy and René Duru, they took on the demolition of the dwellings, which had transformed the Temple of Bēl into a residential neighbourhood in post-classical times; they also reconstructed the sanctuary to the state in which it could be visited until 2015. As early as 1924, the Danish archaeologist Harald Ingholt had started to systematically explore the gigantic corpus of Palmyrene tomb sculptures.¹⁵ From 1925, Antoine Poidebard, one of the pioneers of aerial archeology, had been extensively searching the Syrian Desert focusing mainly on Palmyra’s hinterland for settlement traces of all periods. Poidebard’s aerial photographs are invaluable documents bringing to life a world of the past which has been transformed beyond recognition by human activity over the last few decades. Epigraphers worked along

with the archaeologists, first and foremost Jean Cantineau, who published the first volume of his *Inventaire des Inscriptions de Palmyre* in 1930. It contained a collection of inscriptions from the Temple of Ba'al-Šamen.

After the Second World War, responsibility for the administration of antiquities passed to the now independent Republic of Syria. On the Syrian side, the prehistorian Adnan Bounni, director of excavations for the Syrian Directorate of Antiquities from 1955 to 2005, and Ḥalid al-As'ad, director of the local museum from 1963 to 2003, deserve credit for their unremitting dedication to the site. Al-As'ad, who was murdered in 2015 by terrorists of the Islamic State, coordinated fieldwork at Palmyra for many decades. The Syrian researchers were joined by a closely knit international academic community who, with their diverse cultural and disciplinary backgrounds, reflected the cosmopolitan spirit of ancient Palmyra: French archaeologists continued their work using the Institut Français d'Archéologie du Proche-Orient (IFAPO) at Beirut as their base; a Polish team led by Kazimierz Michałowski and later Michał Gawlikowski worked from 1951 onwards, over a period of more than 50 years, in various areas of the city, from the Temple of Bēl to the Camp of Diocletian, from the northern quarter with its private dwellings and a number of late-Roman and Byzantine churches to the colonnaded street; Swiss archaeologists explored the Temple of Ba'al-Šamen; a Syro-German team excavated the so-called Temple Tomb No. 36 in the western necropolis; Japanese researchers dug two hypogaea with rich tomb sculptures in the south-west necropolis; the Syro-Norwegian Palmyrena project explored the hinterland of the metropolis in several large-scale surveys; finally, a German-Austrian-Syrian excavation team headed by Andreas Schmidt-Colinet examined the so-called Hellenistic city south of the Wadi from 1997 to 2010, charting for the first time in greater detail the early history of the settlement of Palmyra.

When the Syrian civil war broke out in 2011, it put an abrupt end to all archaeological exploration, including fieldwork at Palmyra. However, Palmyra's past is not the exclusive domain of archaeologists. Historians have developed a keen interest in the site, too. One of the first to recognize its eminent importance as a hotspot of politics and trade, reaching its zenith in the third century AD, when it became involved in conflicts of global dimensions, was Theodor Mommsen.¹⁶ More recently, the Oxford historian Fergus Millar has revived the classicists' interest in the Near East. His groundbreaking book *The Roman Near East* (1993) has sparked a debate on the cultural identity of Rome's eastern provinces. Millar's assumption that only Greek and Roman traditions visibly shaped the region, while some sort of cultural amnesia erased all memory of the pre-Hellenistic past, has since found numerous supporters,¹⁷ but also provoked disagreement.¹⁸

Palmyra offers a huge abundance of material, which allows for a wide variety of interpretations: an architectural-artistic form, which is undeniably based on the Hellenistic-Roman model, but goes its own way; the bilingualism, even trilingualism of a large part of the inscriptions; the paramount importance of long-distance

trade for the city's economy; the ambiguous role of tribal identities in its social patterns; the perplexing complexity of the city's divine world, which cannot easily be reduced to simple formulas; and finally, of course, the exceptional role Palmyra played at the apex of the crisis of Rome's "short" third century.

Twinkling pictures

The meticulous work of numerous specialists in the field has shed light on many of these problems in the past decades.¹⁹ Yet two completely different images of Palmyra prevail till the present day. They can best be brought to terms as an "occidental" versus an "oriental" perspective. The occidental school of research in Palmyra emphasizes the close relationship, if not identity, of Palmyra with the cities of the Mediterranean – the Greco-Roman world. For them, the society which evolved in the oasis from the first century BC onwards is the product of a history shared with the Hellenistic East and the Roman Empire; culture and institutions spread, as it were, from the Mediterranean Basin into the oasis. Through consistent Hellenization and Romanization, Palmyra was transformed from the oasis settlement it had originally been into the "Greek city" it became, in roughly a hundred years.²⁰ At its core, the occidental hypothesis is an evolutionary model: occidentals believe in the gradual transformation of a society which is alien to Greek and Roman concepts, into one that can be measured with the same categories.

The orientalist hypothesis, on the other hand, emphasizes Palmyra's dissimilarity from Hellas and Rome, in almost every respect. The focus here is not identity, but alterity. In its purest form the orientalist approach has been put forward by the archaeologist Warwick Ball. Despite accepting the inflow of a "Western" visual language into the material culture not only of Palmyra, but of the entire Roman East, Ball considers the use of this vocabulary as a mere veneer. According to Ball, in the Roman Near East, it was possible to adorn an Iranian temple cella with a Corinthian colonnade, and to call the gods Zeus or Artemis, instead of Melqart, Dushara and Atargatis. The same colonnade could be placed around a court-house temple of Mesopotamian layout, thus cloaking superficially the cultic function of the building. Yet, through such ornamentation the temple did not become Roman in substance, but remained what a sanctuary in the Near East always had been: different.²¹

Both extremist positions ultimately fail to explain the peculiar place Palmyra has in history. Despite departing from opposing assumptions, both models operate with essentialist, indeed obsolete, concepts of culture. Occidentals and orientals alike believe in "pure" cultures, which are free from foreign influences and which can also be kept free in principle. At the most, such cultures can be contaminated by elements which are taken over from the outside – like the architectural language of Greco-Roman origin, which for Ball's Palmyrenes was important only insofar as it could be used as "ornamentation." In this view, processes of acculturation, which are intrinsically complex and unpredictable,

become reduced to simplistic dichotomies: resistance versus being overpowered, continuity versus total reconfiguration.

Both occidentalists and orientalists fail to explain the eruptive energy of the political supernova that was Palmyra. If Palmyra was, as the occidentalists are not tired of emphasizing, a “Greek city” like any other, it would have had neither the human nor the material resources to fill the power vacuum in the East in AD 260. The institutions of a Greek city, a polis, would not have allowed Odainat’s rise to monarchic authority, nor the dynastic consolidation of his charisma. A Septimius Odainat who had become the key figure on the chessboard of power in Palmyra and indeed the entire Roman Near East by AD 250, would have been inconceivable in Roman Athens or Milan, in Carthage or Miletus. But he very positively dominated politics in Palmyra, and that was because the city was fundamentally different from Milan and Miletus.

Yet, the orientalist approach is unconvincing, too. First, historical facts speak against the unbroken continuity between the pre-Hellenistic Near East and Palmyra of the classical period. Palmyra was, despite the finds in the Hellenistic city, a young settlement. If Mesopotamian influences were noticeable in the oasis, they could only have reached it through indirect channels, by means of long-distance trade, just like the supposed Greco-Roman “veneer” did. In fact, Hellenistic Palmyra maintained close trade contacts to the East and West.²² Still more importantly, the orientalist model fails to explain the natural confidence with which the Palmyrenes wandered their city and the much greater world of the Empire. The bilingualism of the inscriptions was anything but veneer; it was symbolic that the Palmyrenes felt truly at home in both worlds.²³

Only gradually, paths are being explored beyond the extremisms of occidentalism and orientalism. The recent surge in specialized scholarship is a blessing and a curse at the same time. For while research on Palmyra can rely on ever more solid data, the field has increasingly become a playground for scholars who, unlike Mommsen, Rostovtzeff and Millar, are concerned exclusively with the Roman and possibly Hellenistic Near East. The area has become somewhat hermetic and what was once a hypothesis has turned, over the years, into solid certainty. For a long time, research on the Hellenistic-Roman Near East suffered from a blatant lack of theory and, correspondingly, precise categories. The persistence of established patterns of interpretation within the research on Palmyra and, in more general terms, the Roman Near East can easily be explained. The field requires considerable philological skills. The researcher concerned with Palmyra has to deal with textual sources of very different kinds, as well as with a wide range of material evidence. What is required in the present situation, is a return to Fergus Millar’s broad perspective: the achievements of specialized research need to be put back into context.

This is now gradually happening. A growing number of scholars active in the field are looking for meaning in the overwhelming amount of evidence. They are seeking alternative approaches, avoiding the old dichotomies of orientalism and occidentalism: Paul Veyne, the doyen of French classical scholarship, conceives

Palmyra as a multicultural cosmos. There, a multitude of influences were at play, creating a hybrid identity that was more than a mixture of East and West. In his PhD thesis defended at the University of Maryland, Andrew M. Smith draws upon Greg Woolf's model of Romanization in the western provinces, coming to conclusions quite similar to Veyne's. Finally, Nathanael M. Andrade, a historian at Binghamton University, recently pointed out that the cultural universes coming into contact in Palmyra were closely intertwined, and that the Palmyrenes used Greek practices and Greek vocabulary to assert themselves in networks and symbolic spaces defined by the Greeks.²⁴

Palmyra: the history of a city

This history of Palmyra is aware of its own limitations. Despite decades of intense research, our knowledge of the ancient city is incomplete and always will be. But this is only one side of the coin. Every attempt to reconstruct history should, no doubt, be concerned with objectivity. But this objectivity reaches its limits when the horizon and interest of the researcher come into play. Through their questions and concepts, they first create the prism, through the refraction of which the flood of evidence becomes a sensible stream of narrative. The questions and concepts are taken from our world, not from the ancient one. Unavoidably, they are inspired by the basic experience affecting each one of us: globalization, mass migration, problems of integration, the disentanglement of multinational collaborations, like the EU, religious fundamentalisms – the list could be continued *ad infinitum*. Such categories are period-specific: every new generation will ask new questions and use new concepts. That is why every generation will have to write new histories, this one included.

The antiquarian approach of writing a history for its own sake is as unrealistic as it is uninteresting. Each story draws its relevance only from the fact that it has something to say to the present. And every historian draws the categories he works with from his own period. The only question is, whether he is doing this consciously or not. Therefore, what is required for writing Palmyra's history is a hermeneutics which accepts that knowledge does not arise solely from the sources, but requires accurate concepts in the first place: concepts for which the researcher has to account. Such concepts are in short supply. Research on Palmyra is dominated by those who collect facts, while there is a scarcity of sense-making. The sense-makers, if their factual knowledge is insufficient, may be losing touch with reality. The collectors, however, run the risk of being led, by their fuzzy concepts, into the mazes of hermeneutic circles. Those who seek ancient Near Eastern cults in Palmyra, or the institutions of a Greek polis, will inevitably find them if they only put under scrutiny the material and not their own ideas.

For neither the polis with its institutions, nor a single cult, whether dedicated to Arṣu or to Bēl, are historical realities. They are merely ideal types created by researchers in their minds, to measure reality. Ideal types gain in precision when as many historical phenomena as possible are included in their design. This is

achieved through a broad historical horizon and through theory as a heuristic aid. This is why, in this history of Palmyra, so much attention has been given to the variety of political cultures, patterns of social organization and economic systems in the Levant and the Mediterranean from the Bronze Age onwards.

No history makes sense without the knowledge of its geographic conditions. The specific ecology of the Syrian Desert provided the conditions for people to settle, for livestock breeding, agriculture and long-distance trade. Its relative flatness made the desert-steppe passable. In this arid space, the limits of human activity were defined by soil quality and hydrology. However, it became clear early on that such boundaries of the human domain were only partly determined by geography. A second key factor was politics. There, where empires and partly sedentary, partly nomadic, so-called polymorphic societies created stable conditions, the probability of people becoming sedentary in marginal areas increased enormously. In the oasis of Tadmur this requirement was fulfilled from the middle Bronze Age onwards (Chapter 2).

However, the centres of the great civilizations of the Bronze and Iron Ages were not to be found in the Levant, in greater Syria, but elsewhere: in Mesopotamia, Egypt and later also in Asia Minor. The Levant was, as a rule, the periphery of at least one great empire, whose power lay in one of the river valleys or in the Anatolian mountains. However, Syria was criss-crossed by the long-distance trade routes, where raw materials and finished goods were transported back and forth between the great empires. A key role in this large-scale exchange of goods during the Bronze Age was played by “ports of trade,” such as the Anatolian *kārum* Kaniš. A second important factor were the great institutions of “palaces” and “temples,” whose representatives were the traders. The Phoenicians went other ways for the exchange of goods, starting from their Levantine port towns to reach new markets on the Mediterranean. In their case, the initiative originated from private individuals. A historical watershed for the region is marked by the destruction of the Persian Empire by Alexander the Great and the establishment of successor states by the following generation of Macedonian rulers. These new empires structurally prepared the ground for the Roman Empire, which by means of force brought political unity to the Mediterranean. With Hellenism, the Greek model of urban community, the polis, gained a foothold in the Levant as well, which surged up more than ever to an economic and cultural bridge between the Mediterranean West and the Asian East (Chapter 3).

Palmyra entered history for the first time as a settlement in the second century BC, precisely at the time when the Seleucid Empire, the largest of the Hellenistic territorial monarchies, was crushed between the expanding empires of the Parthians and the Romans. The decisive impulse for the oasis’ urbanization came from the revival of long-distance trade along the route across the Syrian Desert and Mesopotamia, initially between the Mediterranean and Mesopotamia, soon to include the Persian Gulf and India (Chapter 4). Palmyra’s position between the empires opened up to its merchants the long-distance routes across the Parthian Empire, which could therefore serve as a cost-effective alternative to the southern

route through the Red Sea. In the first centuries AD, however, the presence of Rome became increasingly manifest. Palmyra's integration into the Empire and into the province of Syria was a gradual process that lasted for centuries and left deep traces in the oasis (Chapter 5).

The Roman Near East, into which Palmyra became absorbed in the long run, is a complex piece of political architecture which deserves a digression of its own. While the Romans were lacking any "grand strategy," they were masters in the discipline of muddling through. Romanization affected all parts of the Roman Empire, the Near East included. But it is to be understood only as a dialectical, contingent process which was in no way controlled top-down. On balance, for western Asia – and thus for Palmyra – the first two centuries AD brought about a steady expansion of the Roman sphere of power while, at the same time, the intensity of power was significantly increased (Chapter 6).

Completely new conditions were created by the collapse of the Parthian Empire and its conquest by the Sasanians in the AD 220s. For Palmyra, as for Rome, the environment became much more difficult. From 230 to 260, there was almost uninterrupted warfare, which culminated in the defeat of the emperor Valerian, who was captured by his Sasanian adversary Shapur. If the Romans did not permanently lose the Near East to the Persians, they owed this to Palmyra, where Odainat had become a quasi-monarchic ruler. However, Odainat's death only a few years later opened a dangerous power vacuum that was filled by his widow Zenobia. The situation escalated until, in two battles, the emperor Aurelian defeated Zenobia, took Palmyra by force and abruptly ended the autonomy of this city (Chapter 7).

The events leading to this showdown raise the question as to what were the structural conditions responsible for Palmyra's political rise. As measured by the standards of the Roman Empire, the metropolis in the oasis was a unique specimen – integrated into the organization of the Empire in multiple ways, but with institutions that were only partly compatible with those of a Roman city. To be sure, many things were changing. As time went on, the Palmyrenes became masters in the art of dealing with difference. They acquired techniques of translation, not only in the field of language. This allowed them to find their way into the Roman world without abandoning their traditional ways. In some cases, it was only the Hellenistic-Roman tradition which gave them the vocabulary to express their own identity, the core of which was formed by their nomadic past and the tribal affiliation of the majority of the oasis-dwellers (Chapter 8).

The story of Palmyra did not end with Aurelian's victory over Palmyra. The city has a rich late-classical, Byzantine and Islamic heritage. Palmyra turned from commercial centre to garrison town, from polytheistic cult centre to bishop's see and finally from Byzantine border town to supply centre for a Syrian Desert revived by the Umayyad rule. It finally became the projection surface of romanticizing images of the Near East and, in modern Syria, of a major master narrative providing legitimacy for the nation-state (Chapter 9).

Today, the world heritage is under threat, not only from the iconoclasm of the so-called "Islamic State," but also from neglect and systematic looting (Chapter 10).

Much has been reported and written about Palmyra since the first conquest of the city by the jihadists in 2015, the history of the ancient metropolis, however, plays hardly any role in the West, neither in school curricula nor in public memory. Yet Palmyra is well worth a closer look. The city is not merely a prism through which, precisely because of its position at the outer margin of the Roman world, much can be learned about Rome and its Empire. It is not just the cosmopolitan capital of intercontinental trade that exemplarily highlights the networking potential of pre-modern urban societies. Today Palmyra is above all key witness to the possibilities, prerequisites and limitations of multicultural coexistence. This is perhaps the most important reason for studying Palmyra, from which crucial lessons could be drawn. Unity in diversity can gloriously succeed, but it can also catastrophically fail, and this is epitomized by Palmyra and its history.

Notes

- 1 *Lebensalter*: “Ihr Städte des Euphrats! / Ihr Gassen von Palmyra! / Ihr Säulenwälder in der Eb’ne der Wüste! / Was seid ihr? / Euch hat die Kronen, / Dieweil ihr über die Gränze / Der Othmenden seid gegangen, / Von Himmlischen der Rauchdampf / Und hinweg das Feuer genommen; / Jezt aber siz’ ich unter Wolken (deren / Ein jedes eine Ruh’ hat eigen) unter / Wohleingerichteten Eichen, auf / Der Heide des Rehs, und fremd / Erscheinen und gestorben mir / Der Seeligen Geister.”
- 2 *Joel* 2:30: “Und ich will Wunderzeichen geben am Himmel und auf Erden: Blut, Feuer und Rauchdampf.”
- 3 Constantin François Volney, *Voyage en Syrie et en Égypte pendant les années 1783, 1784 et 1785*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Volland Desenne, 1787).
- 4 Marcus Nathan Adler, *The Itinerary of Benjamin of Tudela* (London: H. Frowde, 1907), 49. On the confusion between Palmyra/Tadmur and Tamar in 2 *Chron* 8:3 below, p. 24.
- 5 Annie Sartre and Maurice Sartre, *Palmyre. Vérités et légendes* (Paris: Perrin, 2016), 14–15.
- 6 William Halifax, “A relation of a voyage from Aleppo to Palmyra in Syria. Sent by the Reverend Mr. William Halifax to Dr Edw. Bernard (Late) Savilian Professor of Astronomy in Oxford, and by him communicated to Dr Thomas Smith, Reg. Soc. S.,” *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society* 217 (1695): 91: “You have the prospect of such Magnificent Ruines, that if it be Lawful to frame a Conjecture of the Original Beauty of the place, by what is still remaining, I question somewhat whether any City in the World could have challenged Precedence over this in its Glory.”
- 7 Gregorio Astengo, “The rediscovery of Palmyra and its dissemination in *Philosophical Transactions*,” *Notes and Records of the Royal Society of Publishing* March 16 (2016): 2–6.
- 8 Today, the painting is in the Allard Pierson Museum in Amsterdam.
- 9 Below, p. 224–25.
- 10 Robert Wood, *The Ruins of Palmyra, otherwise Tedmor, in the Desert* (London: s.n., 1753). French: Robert D. Wood, *Les Ruines de Palmyre, autrement dite Tedmor au désert* (Londres: Millar, 1753).
- 11 Jean-Jacques Barthélemy, *Réflexions sur l’alphabet et sur la langue dont on se servoit autrefois a Palmyre* (Paris: H. L. Guerin and L. F. Delatour, 1754).
- 12 Louis François Cassas, *Voyage pittoresque de la Syrie, de la Phoenicie, de la Palaestine, et de la Basse Aegypte. Ouvrage divisé en trois volumes* (Paris: Imprimerie de la République, 1799).
- 13 Annie Sartre-Fauriat and Maurice Sartre, *Palmyre. La cité des caravanes* (Paris: Gallimard, 2008), 22–23.

12 *Avenues to Palmyra*

- 14 Theodor Wiegand and Daniel M. Krencker, eds, *Palmyra. Ergebnisse der Expeditionen von 1902 und 1917*, 2 vols. (Berlin: H. Keller, 1932).
- 15 Rubina Raja and Annette Højen Sørensen, *Harald Ingholt & Palmyra* (Aarhus: Aarhus University, 2015).
- 16 Theodor Mommsen, *Römische Geschichte*, 9th/5th ed., 5 vols. (Berlin: Weidmann, 1902–1904), vol. 5, 424–42.
- 17 Similarly: Maurice Sartre, *Le Haut-Empire romain. Les provinces de Méditerranée orientale d'Auguste aux Sévères, 31 av. J.-C. – 235 apr. J.-C.*, vol. 9, *Nouvelle histoire de l'Antiquité* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1997), and *D'Alexandre à Zénobie. Histoire du Levant antique. IV^e siècle avant J.-C. – III^e siècle après J.-C* (Paris: Arthème Fayard, 2001), of which there is an abridged English version: *The Middle East under Rome* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), and now, with a different research question and different methodology, Nathanael J. Andrade, *Syrian Identity in the Greco-Roman World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).
- 18 Most outspoken: Warwick Ball, *Rome in the East. The Transformation of an Empire* (London: Routledge, 2000), but also: Kevin Butcher, *Roman Syria and the Near East* (London: British Museum Press, 2003), and Michael Sommer, *Roms orientalische Steppengrenze. Palmyra – Edessa – Dura-Europos – Hatra. Eine Kulturgeschichte von Pompeius bis Diocletian*, vol. 9, *Oriens et Occidens* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 2005).
- 19 To mention the most important ones: on religion the Oxford DPhil thesis by Ted Kaizer, *The Religious life of Palmyra. A Study of the Social Patterns of Worship in the Roman Period* (Stuttgart: Steiner, 2002), and, with particular emphasis on the Palmyrene diaspora in Dura-Europos: Lucinda Dirven, *The Palmyrenes of Dura-Europos. A Study of Religious Interaction in Roman Syria* (Leiden: Brill, 1999), Rev version of a thesis, University of Leiden; on long-distance trade: Michał Gawlikowski, “Palmyra as a trading centre,” *Iraq* 56 (1994); Eivind Heldaas Seland, *Ships of the Desert and Ships of the Sea. Palmyra in the World Trade of the First Three Centuries CE*, *Philippika* vol. 101 (Wiesbaden, 2016); Javier Teixidor, *Un port romain du désert, Palmyre, et son commerce d'Auguste à Caracalla*, vol. 34, *Semitica* (Paris: Librairie d'Amérique et d'Orient, 1984); Ernest Will, “Marchands et chefs de caravanes à Palmyre,” *Syria* 34 (1957); on social organization: Andrew M. Smith, *Roman Palmyra. Identity, Community, and State Formation* (New York: Clarendon Press, 2013); Jean-Baptiste Yon, *Les notables de Palmyre* (Beyrouth: Institut français d'archéologie du Proche-Orient, 2002); on Palmyra's political importance in the third century AD: Udo Hartmann, *Das palmyrenische Teilreich*, vol. 2, *Oriens et Occidens* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 2001).
- 20 The chief representative of the occidental school is the French classicist Maurice Sartre, one of the leading specialists in Palmyra's epigraphy and history. Recently, he presented his version in a volume with the telling title *Palmyre. Verités et légendes*. Fundamental for an understanding of Sartre's conception of Palmyra as a Greek city is the paper “Palmyre, cité grecque,” *Annales Archéologiques Arabes Syriennes* 43 (1996). Sartre currently represents the mainstream in scholarship on Palmyra which includes, for instance: Michał Gawlikowski, “Palmyra. From a tribal federation to a city,” in *Kulturkonflikte im Vorderen Orient an der Wende vom Hellenismus zur römischen Kaiserzeit*, ed. Klaus Stefan Freyberger, Agnes Henning and Henner von Hesberg, *Orient-Archäologie* (Rahden/Westfalen: Verlag Marie Leidorf, 2003); Fergus Millar, *The Roman Near East. 31 BC–AD 337* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 326–27. Similarly, Ḥalid al-As'ad and Andreas Schmidt-Colinet, “Kulturbegegnung im Grenzgebiet,” in *Palmyra. Kulturbegegnung im Grenzgebiet*, ed. Andreas Schmidt-Colinet (Mainz: Philipp von Zabern, 2005), 36–9; Andreas Schmidt-Colinet *et al.*, *Das Kulturbegegnung im Grenzgebiet*, 2nd ed. (Mainz: Philipp von Zabern, 1992), 40–1.

- 21 Ball, 396. Similarly, Jean-Charles Balty, “Palmyre entre orient et occident. Acculturation et résistances,” *Les annales archéologiques arabes syriennes. Revue d’archéologie et d’histoire* 42 (1996).
- 22 Below, p. 56–7.
- 23 See the detailed discussion in: Kaizer, 27–34, and the important contribution by David Taylor, “Bilingualism and diglossia in late antique Syria and Mesopotamia,” in *Bilingualism in Ancient Society. Language, Contact and the Written Text*, ed. James Noel Adams, Mark Janse and Simon Swain (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003).
- 24 Andrade, 209f; Smith, 187f; Paul Veyne, *L’ Empire gréco-romain* (Paris: Seuil, 2005), Chapters V and VI. I have presented my own point of view in: Michael Sommer, “Empire, frontier and ‘third spaces.’ The Near East under Roman rule,” in *Pignora amicitiae. Scritti di storia antica e di storiografia offerti a Mario Mazza*, ed. Margherita Cassia, et al. (Catania: Bonanno Editore, 2012), 132–36; *Roms orientalische Steppengrenze*, 9, 391–408; “Zenobias Kinder. Wie römisch war der römische Orient?” in *Imperium und Romanisierung. Neue Forschungsansätze aus Ost und West zu Ausübung, Transformation und Akzeptanz von Herrschaft im Römischen Reich*, ed. Alexander Rubel (Konstanz: Hartung-Gorre-Verlag, 2013).

2 Palmyra before the Palmyrenes

The oasis of Tadmur is located in the middle of the Syrian Desert which in fact is not a desert, but a zone of transition between the Mediterranean landscape and the Arabian Peninsula. This desert steppe occupies approximately 40 per cent of the modern Syrian nation state's territory. The Syrian Desert never was, as many great deserts are, a locking barrier. It is not free of vegetation, the spring sees it overgrown with plants, and its gravel and stone terrain make it relatively easy to cross. There are only few oases delivering water from underground sources, the most important ones being al-Qaryatayn, south-east of Homs and Tadmur, Palmyra. Simply because they are rare, the oases have been, since ancient times, focal points of human activity. Tadmur has literally been inhabited since time immemorial. The first indications of human presence date back to the Middle Palaeolithic, at about 50,000 BC. After that the evidence dries up for tens of thousands of years. Only the Neolithic delivers evidence of human presence in Tadmur. Written documents from Asia Minor dating back to the early second millennium BC finally mention people coming from "Tadmur."

Transition of physical features

Venetian sailors of the Middle Ages called the eastern fringes of their home sea *levante*: the land where the sun rises. In a broader sense, the term refers to all countries bordering the Mediterranean on the east side, from Turkey to Egypt, including Cyprus. In its more precise meaning, "Levant" indicates the territory of the present nation states of Lebanon, Syria and Israel, and a part of Jordan. Starting from west to east, the area can be roughly divided into a sequence of landscapes. Moving inland and leaving the Mediterranean sea behind, the average annual rainfall declines by the mile, while the proportion of totally barren soil, which is inaccessible to any kind of agriculture, increases dramatically. Geographers speak of a transition of physical features: a relatively moist, maritime climate evolves gradually into a dry continental one, with the respective consequences for soil and water resources (Figure 2.1).¹

Distance however, is not the only factor which determines this kind of change: just as important is the topography, which can either stimulate or hinder the passage of moist air. High ridges are always weather divides. There are several

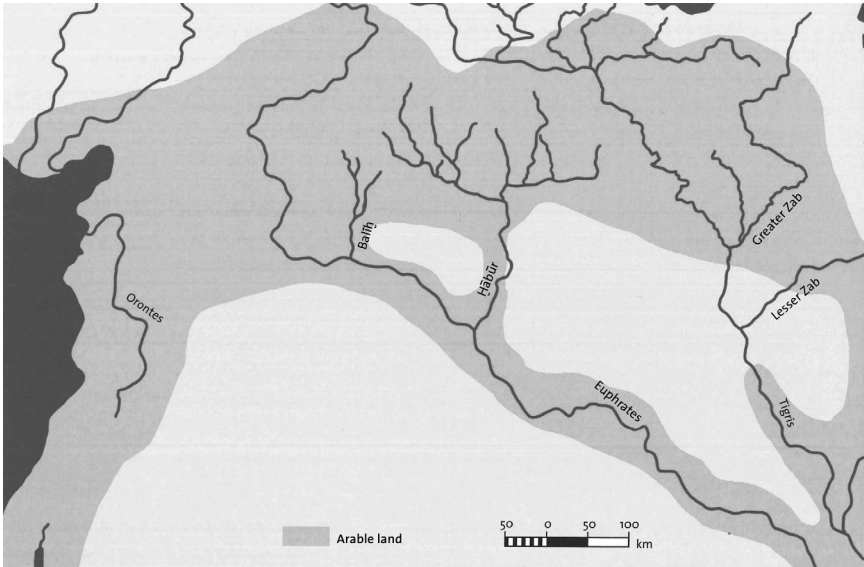


Figure 2.1 The Fertile Crescent

mountain ranges in the Levant, extending roughly in a north–south direction, which act as barriers for the moist air masses coming from the Mediterranean and moving eastwards, which rain themselves out on these heights. In the north there is the Amanus (Nur Mountains), with altitudes of over 2,000 metres, and behind them the Kurd Mountains, no less than 1,500 metres; further south the Jabal al-‘Aqra’ (1,700 metres) and the Jabal al-Anṣārīya (1,500 metres), and east of them Jabal az-Zawīya (900 metres); still further south the mountain ranges of the Lebanon (3,000 metres) and the Anti-Lebanon-Hermon (2,800 metres), each of them reaching alpine heights, and east and adjacent to them, the Palmyra Ranges with up to 1,400 metres. Finally, in Israel, the hills of Galilee (700 metres), in Jordan the Jabal Ajlūn (1,300 metres) and, further inland, on the border between Syria and Jordan, the Jabal ad-Durūz (1,800 metres), as part of the Ḥaurān Massif. In the east, the mountain ranges descend into the Syrian Desert with its depressions and plateaus. Although it is crossed, especially in the south, by numerous wadis, the desert is largely flat.

The transition of physical features creates four clearly distinct landscapes: first, the Mediterranean coastal lowland with the mountain massifs behind it; second, directly behind them, the arable fields of old farmland, with a precipitation amount of over 400 millimetres per year; third, the more recent farming area on the edge of the steppe, with usually less than 400 millimetres of annual precipitation; and fourth, the arid steppe and the desert, with usually less than 250 millimetres of precipitation. The coastline, which comprises the largest part of the Beqaa Valley in Lebanon, as well as the West Bank in Palestine, measures, in

some places, depending on the topographical conditions, only a few kilometres in depth. While in the old arable area along the Aleppo–Hama–Homs–Damascus line, agriculture thrives just by rainwater, without need of artificial irrigation, producing winter cereals and undemanding summer crops, parts of the more recent farming area require elaborate irrigation systems, which however have been in use since ancient times. In the Ghouta (Ghūtāt Dimashq), for example, a large irrigation oasis lying to the west, south and east of Damascus, there is a network of water ditches which has been built and maintained for centuries, and which is mainly fed by two rivers. In other parts of the country, ground water which has gathered in water-impermeable soil layers in the mountains is intercepted by a system of tunnels and shafts known as Qanāts, and carried to the area to be irrigated.

The origins of this diversified relief in the Levant are not old. All the large mountains are the result of severe crustal movements of the Earth in the late Pliocene and Pleistocene, about 3 to 2.5 million years ago. The Eurasian and the Arabian lithosphere plates collided against each other along the coast of the Levant, with the result that the entire western Levant is a zone of increased seismic activity, as well as, especially in southern Syria, of volcanism. Hand in hand with the emergence of high mountain ridges, deep valleys were created running parallel to the coast: the Jordan valley in the south and the Beqaa and Orontes valleys in the north. Because of the young age of the surface formations, wind and weather have hitherto had little effect on the relief. The mountain ranges, especially those of Lebanon and Antilibanon-Hermon, have preserved a rugged, alpine character to the present day. Only the river valleys and wadis bear witness to the effect of exogenous forces on the relief.

In the general frame of transition of the physical features from west to east, a variety of local peculiarities stand out. Geographers speak of “singularities,” which further differentiate the space: on the southern flank of the mighty mountain ranges of the Taurus and the Zagros, which form the Anatolian and Iranian uplands, it is much wetter than further south, with the result that here, as well as deep inland, including northern and north-eastern Iraq, rainfield cultures thrive. In the middle of the plateau of the Syrian Desert, the river systems of the Euphrates and the Tigris create irrigation oases, which are immensely fertile and guarantee high harvest yields all year round. Considering such factors, in his geography of Syria, Eugen Wirth distinguishes seven large landscapes, each with their own potential for people’s use: (1) the Mediterranean Syrian West, which also includes the present nation state of Lebanon; (2) the farm land of the north Syrian plateau around the big cities of Aleppo, Hama and Homs, with trees and crop cultures; (3) the mountain regions and irrigation oases of central Syria around Damascus, where rainfed farming, irrigation cultures and pastoralist nomads coexisted until the recent past; (4) the volcanic highlands of Ḥaurān in southern Syria with its fertile basalt soil; (5) the vast plains of north-eastern Syria, which have only relatively recently been systematically farmed and in which farmers and pastoralist nomads coexisted for a long time, and (6) the arid

steppes of the east and south-east, which are interrupted by the Euphrates and its tributaries, the Nahr al-Balīḥ and the Nahr al-Ḥābūr. Their valleys, as part of the Mesopotamian rivers-oases system, form, on the other hand, (7) a large landscape with a character of its own.

The Palmyrene

The Palmyrene is part of the driest of these seven large landscapes, the desert steppes of the eastern part of the country.² As Wirth observes, the region appears to belong “rather to the subecumene than to the anecumene,”³ meaning it is not a purely nomadic country, nor is it an entirely inhospitable desert like the Sahara or the desert of the Arabian peninsula, where only camel nomads migrating over long-distances can survive. Pastoralist nomads were the ones who in late antiquity, coined most of the topographical names of the region still in use today. The Euphrates divides the predominantly flat al-Jazīra, the upper Mesopotamian “island” between the Tigris and the Euphrates, from the desert steppe plateau of the Shāmīya, with its jagged landscape caused by the wadis, and divided into two unequal halves by the young synclinal massif of the Palmyra Chains and the chalky heights of inner Syria. To the north of the mountain chains, which run roughly from south-west to north-east, lie broad pastures; in the east, towards the Tigris, a region cut by deep valleys; and directly to the south a vast plain, in which the wadis have been eroded for a long time. To the west there are large stone rubble fields, which stretch further westwards into the Ḥaurān.

In the midst of the Shāmīya, at the foot of the Palmyra Chains, lies the oasis of Tadmur. The hinterland of the oasis, the Palmyrene, is not a uniform landscape. It only became a region with this name due to the fact that from the first century BC onwards there was a city in the oasis, which claimed for itself all the land near and far, exercising control and enforcing power over it. The Palmyrene is thus not a natural space, but a political landscape at the intersection of three, distinctly different, natural landscapes. For this reason, the precise definition of the borders of the Palmyrene does not belong to this chapter, but to the historical context of the rise of Palmyra. For a geographic understanding, it is quite sufficient to equate the Palmyrene with the Shāmīya.

Palmyra lies at 450 metres above sea level on the southern edge of the Cretaceous heights, which are made up of different individual massifs (Jabal al-Bil‘ās, Jabal Abyad, Jabal Sha‘ar, Jabal Mēra), and extend westwards from the oasis, in the direction of Homs. The mountains are up to 1,350 metres high and are partly rugged; being cut by deep valleys, they partly have the character of gently rising plateaus. South-west of the oasis, the Palmyra Ranges rise. West of Damascus, they meet the Qalamūn Mountains, which in turn are the north-eastern foothills of the Antilebanon-Hermon massif. In spite of its up-to-1,400-metres height and sometimes quite sharp ridges, this mountain range does not represent a real obstacle, the difference in altitude to the surrounding area being only 400 to 800 metres. The vast basin of the ed-Daw stretches between the chalky heights

and the Palmyra ranges, and from Palmyra it can be reached over a low pass, the “Valley of the Tombs,” which is the most convenient way to the west.

The steppe east of Palmyra has remained largely untouched by the tectonic movements of the western part of the country. The eroding power of the water, however, has been very effective here, despite the low annual rainfall. In the Pleistocene, large sections of the flat steppe were still covered with lakes, which have left their mark in the form of fine sediment deposits. Even today, during the rainy season, numerous salt lakes, called *sebhā*, are found between the Orontes and the Euphrates, in valleys from which the water cannot flow. One of the largest of these lakes, Sebhā el-Muh, is located just south of Palmyra. Water has also created the network of wadis grooving the steppe all the way between Palmyra and the Euphrates. If a number of wadis converge, sediments are often deposited, which are kept moist by running water. Such fertile islands at the bottom of wadis are called *fayda* by the locals.

The steppe changes its face thoroughly during the annual cycle. Still under the influence of the Mediterranean climate, there are two distinct seasons: a hot and very dry summer with daytime temperatures of 35 to 40 degrees Celsius, but much cooler nights with 15 to 20 degrees Celsius, and a cooler and moister winter. The transitional months September/October and April/May often lead to precipitously rising temperatures, causing thereby violent hurricanes with thunderstorms and sand storms. Winter rainfall varies from year to year. If the winter has abundant precipitation, then the steppe vegetation will grow lusher, springs will produce more water and rivers will be fuller. Again and again, the foothills undergo sudden floods after heavy rainfall, and so does Palmyra, where the water flows in torrents down the mountain slopes before pouring out into the nearby salt lake.

The ecosystem of the steppe is extremely vulnerable even to the smallest climatic fluctuations. In this respect, the question arises as to whether the climatic conditions have changed significantly in historical times. Anthropogenic influences – woodcutting, grazing, agriculture, water consumption – have greatly depleted the natural vegetation almost everywhere. In antiquity, the west of Syria was still covered by extended forests of pine, oak, maple, cedar and olive trees. They became thinner towards the east, gradually leaving the place to a savannah-like grassland, which has now practically been reduced to steppe by overgrazing. Hand in hand with the vegetation, already in ancient times, the hydrology of the region changed as well: it became drier, because the soil lost the ability to store water over an extended period of time. All kinds of factors have contributed to set in motion a vicious circle of degradation for the landscape, minimizing the potential of its exploitation. Paleoclimatic studies have shown, however, that these man-made changes have only exacerbated a natural trend towards aridness, which had already set in during the third millennium BC. All in all, the natural conditions in the Palmyrene are now much less favourable than in antiquity and even in Ottoman times.⁴

Neither now nor then was agriculture alone sufficient to sustain the inhabitants of the area. Usually, precipitations well below 200 millimetres are too low for rainfed farming to be worthwhile. In the east of the Ḥaurān, where rainfall is

more copious, the soils are not suitable for agriculture. In many places, however, nomads or semi-nomads are able to achieve significant yields by cultivating field crops, thus improving their diet. In the valley of al-Mazraa west of Palmyra, not a long time ago, nomads produced up to 1.5 tons of wheat and up to 3 tons of barley per hectare. Similar yields were achieved in some of the wadis south of the city of Dair az-Zaur on the Euphrates. In the area of the oases of Qaryatain and Palmyra, farmers have been improving the yields of their irrigation crops by means of rainfed farming.

Even today, the Syrian Desert of the Palmyrene is anything but dead: in many places, it is surprisingly green, especially in the spring after the rains. In pre-modern times, attempts to extract food from the inhospitable habitat went a long way. Building remains and giant cisterns from the Roman and Byzantine periods have been found, which are silent witnesses of human settlement activity far beyond the 200mm-isohyete level. Under the conditions of premodern transport technology, it was worthwhile investing in such settlements: they were an indispensable infrastructural backbone for long-distance trading and were built and maintained with enormous effort. Today, in the age of steadily increasing acceleration, such systems are superfluous. People have withdrawn from the more inaccessible parts of the steppe.

The oasis of Tadmur

There are two geographic factors which decisively influenced the urban development of ancient Palmyra: first, the traffic-favourable position directly at the crossing point between the Palmyra Chains and the inner-Syrian chalk heights; second, the presence of the oasis, which is fed by the Efqa spring, with its palm gardens. Both of these factors taken together made Palmyra in pre-modern times a bottleneck of the East–West long-distance trade: whoever wanted to cross the Syrian Desert virtually had to go through Palmyra.

Approaching Palmyra, one is immediately drawn by the oasis and its green, which forms a sharp contrast to the monotonous greyish ochre of the steppe. Since pumping stations have increased the efficiency of the irrigation system several times over, the area of the palm gardens is considerably larger than in ancient times. The downside of this progress becomes evident as soon as one approaches the source, which lies south of the ancient city, far from its centre. Whilst it was possible to swim in its waters until the early 1990s, today the source is almost dry. In the long term, the oasis' water balance threatens to collapse as a result of constant overexploitation. Palmyra would not be the first oasis in the Sahara and the Middle East to run dry and eventually to be abandoned as a consequence of excessive use.⁵

The Efqa spring has its source on the south-east flank of the Ras el-Manntar, which geologically forms the easternmost foothills of the Palmyra Chains. The water of the spring was never drinkable. It is hot and very sulfuric. That is why the inhabitants of the oasis always had to get their drinking water elsewhere: from cisterns, or from the other water springs, which were spread throughout the urban

area, as well as in the surrounding mountains, and which delivered water over water pipes even at great distances.

The oasis is located in a basin surrounded by the mountain massifs in the west and north and by the slightly higher plateau in the south and east. The centre of the basin forms a plain of about 150 square kilometres, the foundation of which is composed of salt-enriched clay and is water-impermeable. The basin does not have a natural drain, which is the reason why the rainwater collects at its deepest point, in the *Sebhā el-Mū*. In winter, the salt lake extends close to the oasis. In the summer it turns into a white shining crust of salt crystals. Salt was a coveted raw material and was obtained by the inhabitants of the oasis at all times from the *Sebhā el-Mū*.

From camp to settlement

The first evidence of human presence in the Palmyrene goes back to the Middle Palaeolithic. About 50,000 years ago, hunters and gatherers lived in the surroundings of the present oasis, which then did not yet exist. The basin, with its not-yet-salty lakes, offered fresh water; the surrounding mountain ranges, which were covered in forests during the Stone Age, gave protection with their caves. Camp sites are found in many caves in the north, west and east, with flint blades and bone remains, which seem to belong to a hybrid type between the Neanderthal and modern man.

The next indications of human presence in the Palmyrene can only be dated to the end of the Stone Age. In the Pre-Pottery Neolithic (PPNB, ca. 7600–6000 BC), people had settled in the Palmyra basin, using the land, which at the time was still covered by dense vegetation, as pasture grounds for their cattle herds. Pastoralism and, perhaps, partially sedentary farming had meanwhile replaced hunting and gathering as the main source of food supply. Nevertheless, compared to the Paleolithic period, the repertoire of the artefacts had hardly changed: flint-made blades and arrow heads still dominate. Only big heaps of animal bones reveal the economic change which had started to take place during the Neolithic.

At the beginning of the Metal Age, during the so-called Chalcolithic (ca. 5000–4000 BC), people began to deliberately change their natural environment in order to improve its potential for economic exploitation. They built funnel-shaped folds out of stone walls, the so-called desert kites, in which they rounded up herds of goitered gazelles and other wild animals to kill them. Several of these structures have been identified on satellite images.⁶

The first written records from Syria start at about 2400 BC. The extensive palace archive of Ebla documents the economic rise of this north-Syrian city thanks to animal husbandry and timber production. Ebla was linked with the city states in southern Mesopotamia through a wide range of exchanges. Kish and Lagash, as well as the Egyptian Old Kingdom, among others, obtained timber and textiles here. Through long-distance trade, Ebla came into conflict with the city of Mari on the Middle Euphrates, which was also involved in the exchange of goods with Babylonia. The Palmyrene does not appear in Ebla's texts. Whether it was

captured or not by the wave of urbanization, which had spilled over to Syria from Mesopotamia, is not revealed by the sources.⁷

In the late third millennium BC, the land between the Mediterranean and the Middle Euphrates gradually came into the focus of the empires which were emerging in Mesopotamia. They constantly needed metal ores, stones and above all timber. Their insatiable demand for raw materials let the great powers enter military adventures far to the west. We get the first written records from the country called Amurru (“West”) by the Akkadians, at about 2200 BC, during the rule of the Akkadian king Sar-kali-sarri. The king had advanced as far as the Amanus Mountains to obtain urgently needed cedar wood for the construction of temples in Babylonia. In Syria, the king was obviously confronted with resistance, for an inscription mentions an “insurrection of the four corners of the world.” At Mount Basar – probably the Jabal Bishri belonging to the Cretaceous heights – he seems to have defeated the Amurru in a battle.⁸ Almost a hundred years later – the Akkad Empire had already perished – King Gudea of Lagash (c. 2141–2122) reported that he had “brought down large stone plates from Pusala, in the mountains of the Amurru.”⁹

The oldest written records of a settlement in the oasis of Tadmur date back to those years. Excavations in the courtyard of the Temple of Bēl brought to daylight pottery, which indicates that in the late 3rd millennium BC, Palmyra had connections to the East as well as to the West: to southern Mesopotamia, from where a small head of terracotta originates, and to western Syria and the Orontes valley, from where most of the utility pottery originate. Nevertheless, one should not draw premature conclusions about Palmyra’s involvement in large-scale, long-distance trade networks in the early Bronze Age. We know as little about the way the pottery entered the oasis, as we know about the identity of its inhabitants. At any rate, it is certain that the first settlement in Palmyra lasted until the end of the Bronze Age – until about 1200 BC.¹⁰

The existence of a settlement is also confirmed by the first texts mentioning the name of the oasis. These are clay tablets from Kültepe in Cappadocia, the Mid-Bronze Age *karum* Kaniš. A *karum* was an Assyrian trading place, where merchants from the Mesopotamian motherland had settled. The trading colony enjoyed wide autonomy and numerous privileges from the local king. The Kaniš base was used for approximately 300 years, starting from about 2000 BC, until the texts suddenly stopped in 1728 BC. The end of the *karum* was probably related to the conquest of the settlement by the Hittites.¹¹

In Kaniš, all transactions were carefully recorded. In a deed of purchase from the early second millennium, at least one person from the oasis of Tadmur emerges as witness of the process: the contract is concluded “in the presence of Puzur-Ištar from Tadmur” and is authenticated with the “seal of Puzur-Ištar from Tadmur” (*tadmurim*).¹² Puzur-Ištar’s name points to Mesopotamia. It translates as “Mystery of Ištar,” the Babylonian goddess who was worshipped everywhere in Mesopotamia and far beyond. If Puzur-Ištar was a native of Tadmur, one possible conclusion is that Ištar also had a cult in the oasis. Puzur-Ištar’s seal, on the left, shows a bull standing on an altar and being worshipped by a person. On the right, there is an enthroned figure with two adorers and the symbols of the sun and the

crescent moon. The seal's motifs point to Asia Minor (bull) and Assyria (figure on the throne); its relationship to the Tadmur oasis, however, is not clear.¹³

A second document, also from the early second millennium BC, records the delivery of 1/3 mina silver "from Tadmur" (*tadmurim*).¹⁴ Whether there is any connection with the text in which Puzur-Ištar is mentioned, remains unclear. It is noteworthy, however, that in both cases the name of the oasis is used to establish where people or goods came from, so Puzur-Ištar is not identified as belonging to an ethnic group or tribe. Tadmur appears in the texts as one among several well-known places. This makes sense, only if at the time there was a settlement of, probably, reasonable importance in the oasis. Like the older pottery, the texts from Kültepe also prove that Tadmur played a role in Mesopotamia's long-distance trade with the West, although they do not reveal the nature of these contacts.¹⁵

About 200 years after the contract signed by Puzur-Ištar, Tadmur occurs again in cuneiform documents. "A gang of sixty Suteans" is said to have attacked the oases Tadmur (Tadmur) and Nashala (al-Qaryatayn) around 1750 BC. This is reported in a letter from Mari, which during the Middle Bronze Age undertook considerable efforts to control the nomadic tribes to the left and right of the Euphrates, including the Suteans. Reading the second part of the letter, which deals with a death resulting from the assault, is considerably difficult: whether the inhabitants of Tadmur killed a Sutean, or whether one of their own group, who was himself a Sutean, found his death, is controversial.¹⁶ The interpretation of the text passage is not a purely antiquarian problem: if tribal members of the Suteans really lived in Bronze Age Tadmur, then tribal identities bridged up the boundary between city and steppe. And that means that, in spite of all differences, nomads as well as sedentary groups belonged to one and the same society.

This would have far-reaching consequences for the way we imagine how the coexistence of nomads and sedentary people in the Syrian Desert might have been. Modern representations usually follow the reports of the preserved textual sources, which, whether they are written in cuneiform, in Aramaic or in Greek, all follow a similar pattern: in the eyes of their writers, nomads are alien, different and dangerous. Their life in the steppe is separated by an invisible wall from the farmland and the towns of sedentary people. The inhabitants of cultivated land consider the steppe as a place where evil spirits drift, as a "land of thirst" and demons. Nomads like the Suteans are even vilified as cannibals. "Whoever dies among them, they will eat him. When they see a fat man, they kill him and eat him," reports, for example, a Hittite text from the Middle Bronze Age about the nomads of the Syrian Desert.¹⁷

Were nomads and sedentary populations in the Near East really, first and foremost, archenemies, who did not want anything to do with each other? To be sure, there was sufficient potential for conflict in the forced coexistence of both groups in a narrow space. Because of the seasonal change of pastures, pastoralists descended with their herds every winter from the heights into the fertile plains, where, if no one stopped them, their animals devastated the fields of the farmers. Nomads were mobile and capable of action, repeatedly pillaging the possessions of sedentary people, who organized themselves in defence. Yet the relationship

was by no means merely antagonistic, often it was virtually symbiotic. Nomads were dependent on sedentary people, who produced much of what they needed; on the other hand, the herds of pastoralists were an indispensable food reserve for farmers and city dwellers in times of need. Sedentary people and nomads cooperated in warfare and in long-distance trade.

Anthropological investigations of recent societies have shown that precisely there, where nomadic pastoralists practice seasonal change of pastures, the so-called transhumance, in the vicinity of towns, close ties exist between nomads and sedentaries. Town dwellers consider nomads as their kinsmen, familial relations are established between sedentary and non-sedentary groups. It is in particular the upper classes who lead the lives of part-time nomads, spending several months wandering in the steppe and the rest of the year in the city. Both sedentary and nomadic groups participate in the institutions of city and state. Scholars name such societies, in which both ways of life coexist, as “dimorphic,” or “polymorphic,” since no clear boundary can be drawn between nomadism and sedentarism.¹⁸

Whether the Tadmur oasis of the Mari period, about 1750 BC, contained a polymorphic society in the manner described by the anthropologists, cannot be decided on the basis of the ambiguous findings. It is certain that in Mari even nomads and sedentary groups lived together in a narrow space and were in many ways interconnected with each other. *Ḫana* or *ḫibrum* appear as established terms referring to the nomadic component of tribes, which had sedentary relatives as well.¹⁹ Such tribes were grouped into confederacies, whose elites were closely linked with the families ruling in such great centres as Mari.²⁰ Presumably, the reality of the Palmyrene was not too far removed from the conditions at Mari. Bronze Age cairns, which stand out clearly in aerial photographs and are scattered everywhere throughout the Palmyrene, might have served as space markers or as tools to demarcate genealogical structures in space, for instance by means of ancestor worship.²¹ As we shall see later, social polymorphism always played an important role in the Near East whenever empires brought peace to large spaces and set limits to the spheres of action of nomadic groups, which is true for the Palmyrene as well, especially during Palmyra’s golden age in the first centuries AD.

Whether connected by polymorphic structures to the steppe nomads or not, the Palmyrenes of the Mari period were already an integral part of the “international” system of the Bronze Age, which by 1750 BC had reached relatively stable forms: with Elam in modern Iran, Babylon in southern, Mari in central and Assyria in upper Mesopotamia, the Amurritic territories of Qatna and Yamhad in the west, the Hurrian and Hittite Empires in the north, and the Egyptian Middle Kingdom in the south-west. One of the Mari texts, the letter of a palace functionary to the local ruler Yasmah-Addu, tells of two Tadmureans who, towards the end of the eighteenth century BC, were on their way to bring a letter written by Ishi-Addu, king of Qatna, to the Assyrian king Shamshi-Adad. In Mari, they were brought in front of the local ruler, before they went on with their journey to Assur.²² The letter documents Tadmur’s interrelationship with the ruling centres of the Middle-Bronze Age Near East. On the other hand, the Tadmureans were so clearly defined as a group, that the functionary needed not fear any misunderstandings by using

the demonym (*ta-ad-mi-ra-yu*) in his correspondence with the ruler. Finally, at least individual Tadmureans seem to have been so mobile, that the ruler of Qatna entrusted them as messengers. It is also plausible that for a time Tadmur was under the control of the rulers of Qatna. A second document from Mari, reporting the arrival of four Tadmurean messengers from Qatna in the city on the Euphrates, also points in this direction.²³

Around 500 years later, there is a document from Emar, a city on the bend of the Euphrates, whose archive with hundreds of cuneiform tablets came to light during excavation work in the 1970s. The text certifies the repayment of a loan. Witnesses of the transaction are two people “from the permanent settlement of Tadmur” (*URU ta-ad-mir*),²⁴ who were at Emar, about 150 kilometres north of Palmyra, at the time. The Sumerian logogram URU unambiguously indicates a settlement which is similar to a city.

Already in the Iron Age, the name of Tadmur is recorded in the annals of the Middle Assyrian king Tiglath-Pileser I (1114–1076 BC), who in ambitious campaigns ventured as far as Cilicia and Cappadocia in the north, up to the Persian Gulf in the south and all the way to the Phoenician Mediterranean coast in the west. “28 times I crossed the Euphrates [. . .] to the land of Hatti,” boasts the Assyrian ruler, claiming a victory over the “Aramaic Ahlamu,” in an area stretching from the foot of Mount Lebanon and from “the city of Tadmur in the land of Amurru” to “Anat in the land of Suhu” – an island in the middle Euphrates – and “Rapiqu in the land of Karduniash” – near today’s Fallujah in Iraq.²⁵ Tadmur appears in this document only as the corner point of a trapezoidal area, which covered practically the entire Syrian Desert to the right of the Euphrates and was claimed by Tiglath-Pileser. Nevertheless, the text documents the continued existence of a settlement beyond the great caesura at the end of the Bronze Age, which destroyed many of the great centres on the eastern coast of the Mediterranean.²⁶

From the first pre-Christian millennium, there is only highly fragmentary evidence on the oasis. In the second Book of Chronicles of the Old Testament, King Solomon, whose reign can be dated to the tenth century BC, is said to have fortified “Tadmor in the steppe.”²⁷ However, as welcome as such a reference to cross-links between the Kingdom of Judah-Israel and the oasis of Tadmur would be, as little does the text help in this direction. Here, the anonymous compiler of the second Book of Chronicles has merely misinterpreted the source, the First Book of Kings, which mentions Solomon’s building activities in Tamar (“Palm”), a city in Judah.²⁸ On the other hand, the reference shows that there was a well-known settlement at Tadmur at the time when the Book of Chronicles was written, probably in the late fourth or third century BC, otherwise the compiler would have been very unlikely to have made such a mistake, considering the geographical site.²⁹

It is intriguing that Palmyra does not appear even once in the Assyrian texts of the eighth and seventh centuries, although the West and, particularly, Syria played an important role in the military campaigns of the New Assyrian kings. Assuming that in the first half of the millennium a rather significant settlement was in the oasis, and considering its enormous strategic importance, it should be expected to find it mentioned in some of the records. All the more so, since in 645/644 BC, the

Assyrian king Assurbanipal crushingly defeated the nomadic Aribi (“Arabs”) at Yarki (Arak), only about 27 kilometres east of Tadmur.³⁰ The report of this victory remains silent nevertheless, as far as Tadmur is concerned: Palmyra remains hidden from view for centuries.

Notes

- 1 Eugen Wirth, *Syrien. Eine geographische Landeskunde*, vol. 4–5, Wissenschaftliche Lèanderkunden (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1971) is still the fundamental study on Syria’s geography. See also Ewan W. Anderson, *The Middle East. Geography and Geopolitics* (London: Routledge, 2000); W. B. Fisher, *The Middle East. A Physical, Social, and Regional Geography*, 7th ed. (London: Methuen, 1978); Stephen Hemsley Longrigg, *The Middle East. A Social Geography*, 2nd ed. (London: Duckworth, 1970); Eugen Wirth, “Levante und fruchtbarer Halbmond,” in *Die Levante. Beiträge zur Historisierung des Nahostkonflikts*, ed. Michael Sommer, Freiburger Beiträge zu Entwicklung und Politik (Freiburg: Arnold Bergstraesser Institut, 2001).
- 2 Wirth, *Syrien*, 4–5, 438–449; Siegmund Schachinger, “Palmyra im Landschaftsbild,” in *Palmyra. Geschichte, Kunst und Kultur der syrischen Oasenstadt*, ed. Erwin Maria Ruprechtsberger, Linzer Archäologische Forschungen (Linz: Druck- und Verlagsanstalt Gutenberg, 1987). On the historical geography of the region see Daniel Schlumberger, *La Palmyrène du Nord-Ouest. Villages et lieux de culte de l’époque impériale. Recherches archéologiques sur la mise en valeur d’une région du désert par les Palmyréniens* (Paris: Faculté des Lettres Université de Paris, 1951) and more recently Paola Mior, *The Southwest Palmyrena in the Roman Period. Patterns of Land Exploitation and Territorial Management*. Diss. phil. (Udine: Università degli Studi di Udine, 2013/14) and Torbjørn Preus Schou, *Mobile Pastoralist Groups and the Palmyrene in the Late Early to Middle Bronze Age (c. 2400-1700 BCE). An Archaeological Synthesis Based on a Multidisciplinary Approach Focusing on Satellite Imagery Studies, Environmental Data, and Textual Sources*. Diss. phil. (Bergen: University of Bergen, 2014).
- 3 Wirth, *Syrien*, 4–5, 438.
- 4 Preus Schou, 30–55.
- 5 On water management in antiquity Dora P. Crouch, “The water system of Palmyra,” *Studia Palmyrenski* 6–7 (1995); Jean-Baptiste Yon, “La gestion de l’eau à Palmyre. L’exemple de la source Efqa,” in *Stratégies d’acquisition de l’eau et société au Moyen-Orient depuis l’antiquité*, ed. Mohamed al-Dbiyat and Michel Mouton (Paris: ifpo, 2009); Julia Hoffmann-Salz, *Die wirtschaftlichen Auswirkungen der römischen Eroberung. Vergleichende Untersuchungen der Provinzen Hispania Tarraconensis, Africa Proconsularis und Syria*, vol. 218, Historia Einzelschriften (Stuttgart: Steiner, 2011), 402–05; “The local economy of Palmyra. Organizing agriculture in an Oasis environment,” in *Ownership and Exploitation of Land and Natural Resources in the Roman world*, ed. Paul Erdkamp, Koenraad Verboven and Arjan Zuiderhoek (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2015), 239–47.
- 6 Giovanni Pettinato, *Ebla. Nuovi orizzonti della storia* (Milano: Rusconi, 1994), 173–79.
- 7 Mario Liverani, *Antico Oriente. Storia, società, economia* (Bari: Laterza, 1988), 263.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Walther Sallaberger, “From urban culture to nomadism. A history of Upper Mesopotamia in the late third millennium,” in *Sociétés humaines et changement climatique à la fin du troisième millénaire. Une crise a-t-elle eu lieu en Haute Mésopotamie? Actes du Colloque de Lyon, 5–8 décembre 2005*, ed. Catherine Kuzucuoğlu and Catherine Marro. Varia Anatolica (Wien: Phoibos, 2007), 431; Horst Klengel, “Palmyra and international trade in the Bronze Age. The historical background,” *Les annales archéologiques Arabes Syriennes* 42 (1996).

- 10 Peter W. Haider, "Vor- und Frühgeschichte der Oase von Palmyra," in *Palmyra. Geschichte, Kunst und Kultur der syrischen Oasenstadt*, ed. Erwin Maria Ruprechtsberger (Linz: Druck- und Verlagsanstalt Gutenberg, 1987), 115; Ulf Scharrer, "Nomaden und Sesshafte in Tadmor im 2. Jahrtausend v. Chr.," in *Grenzüberschreitungen. Formen des Kontakts zwischen Orient und Okzident*, ed. Monika Schuol, Udo Hartmann and Andreas Luther, *Oriens et Occidens* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 2002), 305; Horst Klengel, *Zwischen Zelt und Palast. Die Begegnung von Nomaden und Sesshaften im alten Vorderasien* (Wien: Schroll, 1972), 31.
- 11 Liverani, 358–66; Klaas Roelof Veenhof, "Aspects of old Assyrian trade and its terminology," in *Studia et documenta ad iura orientis antiqui pertinentia*, ed. Klaas Roelof Veenhof (Leiden: Brill, 1972); Amélie Kuhrt, "The Old Assyrian merchants," in *Trade, Traders and the Ancient City*, ed. Helen Parkins and Christopher Smith (London: Routledge, 1998).
- 12 EL 303, A 16f.; B 2f. Cf. Scharrer, 301–02.
- 13 Scharrer, 302f.
- 14 TC III 82, 17.
- 15 Thus, convincingly, Scharrer, 305f.
- 16 In favour of the former Scharrer, 308, who disagrees with Klengel, *Zwischen Zelt und Palast*, 196.
- 17 KBo III 60 II. Cf. Volkert Haas, "Die Dämonisierung des Fremden und des Feindes im Alten Orient," *Rocznik Orientalistyczny* 41 (1980): 41.
- 18 Social dimorphism: Michael B. Rowton, "Urban autonomy in a nomadic environment," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 32 (1973); "Enclosed nomadism," *Journal of the Social and Economic History of the Orient* 17 (1974); "Dimorphic structure and topology," *Oriens Antiquus* 15 (1976); "Dimorphic structure and the tribal elite," in *Al-Bahit. Festschrift Joseph Henninger zum 70. Geburtstag*, ed. Franz Josef Thiel (St. Augustin: Verlag des Anthropos-Instituts, 1976); "Dimorphic structure and the parasocial element," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 36 (1977); polymorphism: Israel Finkelstein, *Living on the Fringe. The Archaeology of the Negev, Sinai and Neighbouring Regions in the Bronze and Iron Ages*, vol. 6, Monographs in Mediterranean Archaeology (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 26; Scharrer, 296.
- 19 Preus Schou, 263–64.
- 20 Ibid., 339.
- 21 Ibid., 342–43.
- 22 Scharrer, 314.
- 23 Ibid.
- 24 ARMT XXII (1) 15, 16–18. Cf. Scharrer, 315.
- 25 Scharrer, 316.
- 26 On the collapse, Mario Liverani, "The collapse of the Near Eastern regional system at the end of the Bronze Age. The case of Syria," in *Centre and Periphery in the Ancient World*, ed. Michael Rowlands, Mogens Trolle Larsen and Kristian Kristiansen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); "Dal 'piccolo regno' alla 'città-stato,'" in *Alle soglie della classicità. Il mediterraneo tra tradizione e innovazione*, ed. Enrico Acquaro (Pisa: Istituti Editoriali e Poligrafici Internazionali, 1996); Michael Sommer, "Der Untergang des hethitischen Reiches. Anatolien und der östliche Mittelmeerraum um 1200 v. Chr.," *Saeculum* 52 (2001) and Eric H. Cline, *1177 v. Chr. Der erste Untergang der Zivilisation* (Darmstadt: Theiss, 2015).
- 27 2 Chron 8:4.
- 28 1 Kings 9:18.
- 29 Haider, 116.
- 30 Israel Eph'al, *The Ancient Arabs. Nomads on the Borders of the Fertile Crescent. 9th–5th centuries B.C.* (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1982), 159–60.

3 From Akkad to Antioch

Syria, the great powers and the rise of a world-system

It took Palmyra almost a thousand years to emerge from the darkness of oblivion. Only the last archaeological campaign series before the Syrian civil war, jointly organized, from 1997 to 2010, by the Syrian Directorate of Antiquities with the German Archaeological Institute and the University of Vienna, brought to light the outlines of the so-called Hellenistic city, revealing the beginnings of Palmyra's urban development in classical antiquity. Many questions remain still unanswered: above all, researchers are still in the dark about the history of the oasis between the early Iron Age and its conquest by Alexander the Great. Even for the Hellenistic period, the findings are still very scarce. The archaeological and historical hiatus can be explained in two ways: either the oasis really did not play any role as a settlement, or just a subordinate one, throughout the entire Neo-Assyrian, Babylonian, Achaemenid and even Seleucid periods; or Palmyra's dark centuries are merely an optical deception, due solely to the fortuitousness of surviving evidence.

Peripheral location and imperial cycle: Syria at the mercy of the great powers

Syria was probably what the Greeks first called the region which we now refer to as the "Levant." It covers a far larger area than the present nation state of the same name, which was established by France as a mandatory power in 1930. In addition to modern Syria, the historical landscape of Syria includes, at least, the territory of modern Lebanon and the part of Turkey lying south of the Taurus Mountains, i.e. the plains of Urfa and Mardin in northern Mesopotamia. Parts of modern Iraq (the Jazīra between the Euphrates and the Tigris), modern Israel (ancient Judea) and the northern part of Jordan (the Dekapolis with the cities of Philadelphia, Gerasa, Pella, Gadara, Dion and Raphana) are closely linked to Syria. The common element of this landscape, roughly bordered by the Taurus, the Mediterranean, the Tigris, and the Arabian Desert, was the prevalence of the Aramaic language, which had spread throughout the fertile crescent since the early first millennium BC, advancing to become one of the official languages in the Persian Empire of the Achaemenids. The name *Syria* derives presumably from *Assyria*, that part of the Mesopotamian landscape lying in the triangle

between the middle Tigris and the Lesser Zab, which had become the nucleus of no fewer than three hegemonic states in the Mid and Late Bronze Age: the Old (eighteenth century BC), the Middle (c. 1390–1077 BC) and the Neo-Assyrian (911–605 BC) Empires.

The position on the edge of imperial powers was pivotal for the development of politics in the Levant. Of all the great kingdoms dominating the region, only the Damascus Caliphate of the Umayyads had Syria as its exclusive centre, from AD 661 to 750. The Seleucid kingdom, which controlled the Near East in its role as the successor state of Alexander's Empire, at least had one of its two core regions in northern Syria – the second one being Babylonia, which the Seleucids lost to the Parthians in the second century BC. Otherwise, the eastern flank of the Mediterranean lay, from a political point of view, always on the margins. Sometimes it even was the periphery of two empires with overlapping territorial claims: in the third millennium BC, for instance, the Empire of Akkad (c. 2334–2154 BC) in Babylonia and the Egyptian Old Kingdom (c. 2551–2155 BC) both struggled for control over the coastal strip of Syria-Palestine.¹

A second factor which determined the political life of the region between the Mediterranean and the Tigris, was the constant birth and demise of empires. The average “durability” of ancient Near-Eastern empires was about 200 years: from Akkad to the Empire of the Third Dynasty of Ur (c. 2112–1940 BC), the ancient Babylonian (1894–1595 BC) and the Old Assyrian (1813–c. 1700 BC), the Middle Assyrian, the Neo-Assyrian and the Neo-Babylonian (629–539 BC), and finally the Persian Empire of the Achaemenids (550–330 BC). In a similar way, the Old, the Middle (2040–1785 BC) and the New Kingdoms (1540–1070 BC) took turns in Egypt. Between the periods when empires held power, there always lay phases of political fragmentation, which in Egypt were referred to as “intermediate periods,” and were often accompanied by war, civil war and general chaos.

The decline and fall ran fundamentally alike: internal conflicts grew along with the rise in strength of external enemies, with whom the empires could hardly cope in the long run; overstretching borders and overstraining the military capacity resulted in defeats and economic crises, which undermined the legitimacy of the rulers and made the empires ungovernable. Finally, the political structure disintegrated and the “barbaric” margins fell apart, becoming incubators of new agglomerations of power: these were almost invariably nomadic tribes, whose leading clans soared to dynasties of new empires. The wheel of the imperial cycle had turned full circle on its axis.²

The imperial cycle is exemplarily illustrated by the rise and fall of the Empire of Akkad, the very first empire in history.³ The founder of the Empire, Sargon of Akkad, had his roots in a semitic-speaking ethnic minority in the Sumerian city-state of Kish. The legend-like texts on Sargon locate the homeland of his ancestors to the “highland,” which might indicate a nomadic origin.⁴ In Kish, he first overthrew the local king Ur-Zababa, before starting with the external expansion. In 2334 BC, he conquered Uruk, which lay further south, and which had already subjugated several of the older city-states. The previously sovereign city-states became now autonomous cells of his Empire; as a rule, the kings remained

in office, but had to pay dues and service in warfare to Sargon's headquarters, the city of Akkad, whose location still remains unknown. The title of *ensi*, which until then had been born by the sovereign rulers of the Sumerian cities, now designated autonomous sub-kings, who were subject to the great king in Akkad. The large-scale domination enforced by Sargon carried the advantage that the irrigation system, on which agriculture in the Mesopotamian river oasis was dependent, could be organized more efficiently. Akkad also standardized the system of tax collection, as well as measures and weights, enforcing the language of the ruler, the Semitic Akkadian, as the language of administration throughout the Empire. The local gods' cults remained untouched, but Sargon upgraded the temple of the moon goddess Nanna at Ur to a kind of imperial sanctuary.

Sargon's grandson Naram-Sin (c. 2273–2219 BC) expanded the Empire into upper Mesopotamia and Syria, whose settlement systems were thoroughly reconfigured according to the needs of his Empire. He translated his own claim to world domination into the formula "King of the Four Earthquarters." But Naram-Sin went a step further: he had himself be addressed as the "God of Akkad." Portrayals depict the king with a crown of horns on his head, the symbol of divinity. The claim to divine honour brought Naram-Sin into conflict with the established cults of the Sumerian cities, making him clash against the interests of the local priesthood and posthumously granting him a bad press. The "Curse of Akkad," a Sumerian text written after Akkad's fall, defames Naram-Sin as a blasphemer who would not even stop short of destroying temples.⁵

Now fundamental tensions came to the surface, increasingly becoming a stress test for the Empire. The tendency towards centralization was opposed by the aspirations of the autonomous cities to restore their sovereignty. Under Naram-Sin's son and successor Sar-kali-Sarri, the conflicts intensified so far that the Empire lost its inner cohesion. The ensuing power vacuums were used by groups of "barbarians" to revolt from the inside or to invade the Babylonian core area from the outside. The cuneiform sources name several of such probably mainly mobile groups: the Martu, or Amurru, in Syria and the Gutí in the Zagros Mountains. The Gutí conquered a number of cities in Babylonia. Some of them staged themselves there as successors of the Akkad kings; one of them, a certain Erridu-pizir, even took the title of "King of the Four Earthquarters," although his dominion hardly extended beyond the city of Nippur. The conquerors assimilated quickly, and were probably no longer to be distinguished from the Sumerian population, when Ur-Nammu (c. 2112–2095 BC), the king of Ur and a major player in the creation of Mesopotamia's next large empire, boasted to have driven the Gutí away.

The history of the rise and fall of the Empire of Akkad contains all the elements that played a role in the creation of the subsequent empires as well. A ruler with an obscure, perhaps nomadic background, usurps power in a core area. The centre of power expands: various peripheries with different degrees of governance are created. The centre avoids direct rule over its peripheries, employing instead autonomous vassals, whose freedom of movement is greater the further away they are from the centre. Autonomy and intensity of governance are ideally arranged in concentric circles starting from the centre and being in an unequal relationship

with each other. In the case of the Empire of Akkad, the normative power of the centre is more strongly felt in Babylonia than in upper Mesopotamia and Syria. Loss of power at the centre sets in as a result of internal conflicts, which are often accompanied by dynastic turmoil and periods of economic downturn. The effect is intensified, as at the same time, the empire falls under pressure from the outside. “Barbarians” and competing imperial powers perforate the imperial borders, inflict discomfitures to the rulers and thus undermine their prestige. In the long run, no empire can stand such negative effects: the empire disintegrates and gives way to a power vacuum, in which, ironically, the previous anti-imperial actors take over the role of a new, regulatory power, which often will wear in no time the cloak of an empire.

In every imperial cycle, Syria played both the role of a periphery with a low intensity degree of governance, as well as that of an almost inexhaustible reservoir of nomadic “barbarians,” who at crucial moments could turn into anti-imperial actors, to subsequently become founders of empires themselves: the Martu-Amurru from the late third millennium BC, the Achlamaeans, Suteans and Kassites in the Middle Bronze and the Arameans in the Late Bronze Age. Compared to the primary centres of civilization and power, Babylonia and Egypt, Syria’s population and settlement density were by far lower; agricultural production was less intensive; all social and economic parameters less complex. In the second millennium BC, a third power-centre was established in the north. The setting of this occurrence was not Syria, but Asia Minor, where first the Hurrians, and later the Hittites, undertook several attempts to form an empire. From then on, Syria lay at the geographical intersection of three imperial spheres of interest.

Long-distance trade and social organization in the Ancient Near East

In spite of its relative lack of significance in the politics of power, the Levant always played a key role in transferring goods between the great powers. It had important sources of raw materials: stone and timber were available in the mountains of Syria and were urgently needed in Mesopotamia, as well as Egypt. In addition, Syria was a hub for the trade in metal ores, coming mostly from Asia Minor and from the island of Cyprus. At least since the late Neolithic period, a dense network of trade routes linked the Levant to Mesopotamia, from where as early as in the fourth millennium BC, the first stimuli to urbanization reached the region of the upper Euphrates and of the Ḫābūr.⁶ The cities of the Levantine coast, especially Byblos in Phoenicia, maintained a lively exchange with Egypt, which played here a similar role to that of Mesopotamia for inner Syria.⁷

For the urban societies of the Bronze Age, the exchange of goods had a vital function. No temple building would have been possible in Egypt without timber from Mount Lebanon, no relief for Mesopotamian kings could have been carved without stone imported from Syria or Iran. As early as in the third millennium BC, raw materials and finished products were as mobile as people were. In order to acquire things from a distance, one had either to get them by force, or to exchange.

Exchange of goods between Ancient Near Eastern societies was not, however, a “trade” in the proper sense. Ores, timber, stone, salt and grain had no real “market,” where prices and exchange conditions could be “negotiated.”

Goods’ exchange over long distances was the business of experts. The Akkadian term for “long-distance merchants” used in the texts of *karum* Kaniš is *tamkāru* (plural: *tamkārum*). These so-called merchants were not a homogeneous group: some of them were active in the transportation of goods from Assur to Kaniš (and back), others were based in Kaniš, and again others in Assur. Among the *tamkārum* resident in Kaniš, two types with apparently differing ranks can be distinguished: one group functioned as freight forwarders, were in direct contact with the transporters and took care of the handling of the trade, while the other group were active in the background, using the freight forwarders as their agents. Three kinds of documents highlight this quite complex organization: first, contracts concluded in Kaniš between transporters and forwarders; second, letters from residents in Kaniš to their trading partners in Assur, which reveal the identity of the transporter and the content of the shipment; and third, letters from merchants in Assur to their colleagues in Kaniš, specifying the type and amount of payment, transport costs and taxes.⁸

Traded goods were always the same. Assyria exported textiles and tin, the indispensable metal for bronze production. In exchange, the Assyrians obtained precious metals from *karum* Kaniš: silver and, to a lesser extent, gold. Tin came primarily from the Iranian plateau, textiles from Babylonia and Assyria. Therefore, for a large part of the goods, the Assyrians were merely intermediary merchants. Before the invention of coins, silver and gold were hoarded and used as means of payment. Presumably, a considerable part of Assyria’s population was directly or indirectly involved in textile production and trade. Transports were carried out by means of donkey caravans, which started from Assur on a yearly basis. The caravans travelled along the Tigris first to Apum (Tell Leilan), then followed the Hābūr up to Abrum, at the junction with the Euphrates. Following the Euphrates, they moved northwards to modern Elbistan. From here, walking over “seven rivers” and “seven mountains,” crossing the mountainous landscape of Cappadocia, they covered the remaining, very arduous 300 kilometres to Kaniš. All in all, the caravans travelled about 25 kilometres a day. For the almost 1,000-kilometre long journey, including intermediate stops, they needed about 50 days.⁹

The donkeys, which were loaded with saddle bags on both sides, carrying up to 90 kilos of goods per animal, were sold at the end of the journey, in Kaniš. The profit margin of the transactions was immense. One shekel of silver was exchanged for 13 to 16 shekels of tin in Assur. In Kaniš, the merchants received one shekel of silver for 6 to 8 shekels of tin, thus reaching a profit margin of 100 per cent. Even deducing the costs incurred by transport and various charges, the Anatolian trade was an immensely profitable business for the Assyrians. But whose business was it? It is indisputable that the *tamkārum*, who organized the goods trade with Cappadocia in various functions and on various levels of hierarchy, were able to put part of the surpluses into their own pockets.¹⁰

On the other hand, we know that at least the majority of those involved in long-distance trade were employed in “official” missions. Most of the *tamkārum* were in direct service of the Assyrian king: they were functionaries of the central institution, the “palace.” The distinction between private and public, which dominates every sphere of modern economic life, was not known in the urban societies of the Ancient Near East. There was no “state” in the modern sense of the word. Its function was performed by large households – Sumerian *e* (“house”) – at the top of which, according to early Mesopotamian tradition, stood gods. Not having a better terminology, we translate *e* with the word “temple.” Yet the political and social functions of these institutions extended far beyond that, what we associate with the concept derived from the Latin word *templum*. The “houses” were the dwelling places of gods – and political and economic centres of the city at the same time. With the progressive differentiation of urban societies, single individuals succeeded in concentrating considerable social authority and economic power into their hands. The houses of such men, who in Sumerian were called *ensi* (“Lord of the arable land”), and later *lugal* (“Great man”), became as important as “temples.” Scholars refer anachronistically to such institutions, which, like the “temples,” were equipped with extensive storage spaces and archives, as “palaces.” More appropriate is the Sumerian term *e-gal*, “big house,” for indeed the “palaces” distinguished themselves from other households most notably due to their colossal proportions.

Such large institutions, which at the beginning coexisted side by side, were the places where the surplus yield of the agriculturally enormously productive soil with its irrigation fields was collected, stored and managed. From here, the city-based specialists who worked for the “temple” or the “palace” were supplied with daily cereal rations. The city of Mesopotamia’s Early Dynastic Period was a classic “consumers’ city,” as described by the sociologist Max Weber. The consumers’ city of the Ancient Near Eastern type lives from a large patrimonial household, which can have resources coming from outside into the city.¹¹ These resources are “redistributed” in the city among authorized recipients, who are in the service of the large household. Scholars therefore speak of a “redistributive” economy, in which goods change owners without needing to go through a “market.”¹²

Modern economies, to be sure, are familiar with redistribution as well: the entire government sector, financed by taxes and levies, operates on this pattern. Only the dimensions have shifted: in today’s European countries, the national quota – the state’s share in the national economy – is about 50 per cent. In the societies of the Ancient Near East, the predominant part of all the goods which were not directly consumed by their producers, passed through one of the great institutions. The exact amount of this share and the nature of its development over the centuries are controversial among scholars. While Marxists and so-called “primitivists” regard the great institutions as virtually omnipotent and consider the effect of market principles to be feasible, if at all, just in niches, “modernists” are more optimistic about the applicability of modern economic theories to Ancient Near Eastern societies.¹³

Whatever quantitative significance may be ascribed to the great institutions, it was only through redistribution that economic actors within a society could be integrated into an economic cycle. And it was only through the work of the large institutions that urban societies were able to function at all. "Big houses," however, did not play an economic key role merely within the city bounds. They were the main players in the exchange of goods across great distances. The professional long-distance merchants of the Old Assyrian period, however great their private engagement in the long-distance trade may have been, were always first and foremost palace functionaries. The status of a *tamkāru* gave its owner an "official" role as a representative of Assur's city ruler. How the prices of goods came to be fixed, when they changed owners in Kaniš, is not precisely revealed in the sources. Certainly, distances and the availability or non-availability of resources at the sites of exchange played their part. Nevertheless, prices were not subject to free negotiation on the "market." The decisive factor seems to have been the regulatory intervention of political authorities, who fixed prices according to criteria which could not be influenced upon by market forces. For this kind of exchange, the economic anthropologist Karl Polanyi denies the applicability of market principles, speaking instead of "administered trade."¹⁴

In administered trade, the economic interests of all players who got involved – from power elites in the cities to professional merchants – must obviously have played a role. They do not appear, however, in the texts recording the trade. The goods' exchange seems to have been embedded in a whole network of social relations, which connected the rulers of the Bronze Age Near East's great and small states with each other. As family members do, these great men referred to each other as "brothers," "fathers" and "sons," depending on their status and authority. Accordingly, they used to deal with each other on the basis of trust. Little gifts sustain friendship, so in the fancied extended family of Bronze Age potentates, material as well as immaterial gratifications were the putty which held together political alliances and rewarded friendly coexistence. In this fictive "family," every service received the form of a gift, be it, in modern hindsight a tribute, a commodity, or the protection of a less powerful person by a more powerful one. According to the current ideal of justice, each gift compelled at least an equivalent one, a "reciprocal" gift in return.¹⁵

In addition to the administrative intervention of political authorities, the unwritten rule of reciprocal gift exchange is the second parameter which distinguishes the Bronze Age movement of goods from modern, market-oriented commerce. Nothing in this system, which was dominated by the great institutions, is as it seems at first glance. The quite real economic interests of actors such as the *tamkāru* are no indication of the pre-eminence of market economic forces; and, conversely, the dominance of the great institutions is by no means so total that they would exercise a monopoly, certainly not a state monopoly, for the idea of the state is, strictly speaking, not yet born. It becomes clear that the economy is not an autonomous subsystem or "field" of society, the sole factor governing human actions. The people of the Bronze Age make decisions on the basis of cost-benefit calculations, however, their options for action are

also conditioned by many other factors lying beyond all economic reasons, such as notions of justice, solidarity and loyalty, which are the real values holding their world together. Again, Karl Polanyi has coined the crucial term for understanding this distant reality. He speaks of the “embeddedness” of economy in other areas of social acting.¹⁶

The Phoenicians

With regard to the “world” of the Bronze Age, which stretched from the Aegean deep into Iran, the actions of the great powers were “global”: people, goods and ideas circulated widely, the degree of interdependency was relatively high, the range on which events had an impact was far-reaching. The system was integrated to such an extent, especially in the late Bronze Age, that crises cooking up in marginal areas could build up to catastrophes for the entire world order. This is exactly what happened around 1200 BC. The economic inefficiency of the Hittite Empire and the political inefficiency of its vassals in the Levant drew, little by little, all the great empires and small kingdoms far and wide, from the Aegean to Mesopotamia and Egypt, into a downwards maelstrom, leaving nothing of the Bronze Age world order, which seemingly had been crafted for eternity. At the beginning of the twelfth century BC, the entire eastern fringe of the Mediterranean was back to square one, which is why room was left for completely new forms of political and economic organization. An age of experiment had set in.¹⁷

The collapse of the first globalization, which had been supported by the great powers of the Bronze Age, from the Hittite Empire to Assyria, Babylonia and Egypt, immediately sowed the seeds for a second wave of global convergence, which this time was unevenly dynamic and originated from small units. The focal point of this event was the Levant, whose urban civilization survived the rupture of 1200 BC more or less unscathed. While in many parts of the Near East there was hardly a stone left standing, the settlement history of the narrow coastal strip of the Levant reveals a remarkable continuity: many of the cities outlived the great upheaval without damage, while others, although affected, soon resurrected from the ruins like a phoenix from the ashes. Cities such as Arados, Byblos, Sidon, Tyre, Dor, Ashkelon and Gaza enjoyed a prosperity which, even at a distance of three thousand years, stands out unmistakably in the archaeological findings. It is all the more astonishing if one compares the flourishing centres of the coast with the inland, in which groups had settled, calling themselves Aramaeans in the north, and Hebrews in the south. According to their own historical memory, the Hebrews came as a confederacy of twelve tribes to the Levant, taking possession of the land by force. The stories of the Exodus and land seizure are told in the second to fifth books of Moses, as well as in the books of Joshua and the Judges of the Old Testament – of course the talk is about the Israelites.¹⁸

Juda, Israel and the Syrian inland were marginal territories when, around 1000 BC, the inhabitants of the Levantine coastal cities took to the sea, leaping into the great unknown of an unmapped world, which stored great dangers for

sailors, but much larger profit opportunities as well. The main protagonists of this centuries-long bonanza of intercontinental trade were the people mentioned in Homer's epic poems written in the late eighth and the early seventh century BC, as *Phoínikes*, the "blood reds." The name derives from the merchandise for which the "Phoenicians" became famous throughout the ancient Mediterranean world: purple-tinted textiles. The dye was obtained, via laborious craftsmanship, from sea snails of the *Murex* family, which were plentiful in the sea area of the Levant. The dye production was such an elaborate process that purple textiles ranked among the most expensive commodities in Antiquity: they were literally worth more than their weight in gold.¹⁹

Purple textiles were, of course, not the only goods with which the Phoenicians traded. Skilful ivory carvings, ostentatious vessels of precious metal, glass, cult objects – Phoenician artisans were specialized in the production of luxury articles of almost every kind. At the height of its commercial power, in the eighth and seventh centuries BC, the world of the Mediterranean and the neighbouring Near East was divided into two zones: one, in which people lived off trade and the production of objects which were everywhere in demand, and the other, in which they lived mainly from agriculture and animal husbandry. Agriculture and animal husbandry secured the livelihood of people practically everywhere, except in the Levant. Only here, society, technology and economy had reached a degree of complexity which enabled cities to create values from which to secure their existence.²⁰

The basis was a highly specialised economy, in which division of labour dominated. Something like a "world market" on the basis of an expanding, money-free barter trade was coming into existence. Phoenician cities were the hub between important raw material deposits, granaries and artisanal production centres. Their inhabitants intertwined such distant places as southern Spain, Cyprus, Egypt, Israel and Mesopotamia into a steadily growing network, in which commodities could circulate and prices fluctuate. This time it was not bureaucrats or kings' agents who managed the long-distance trade, but individuals with their own initiative. Small, often motley, groups of seafaring merchants ploughed the seas on fragile-looking ships, searching for distant shores, offering for sale what they carried in their ships, buying what the strangers had to sell.²¹

Many of them moved permanently overseas, establishing trading bases on remote coasts, and from there making contacts to the inland, where they gained access to markets and raw materials. This was not a "colonization," as has often been argued, but rather the systematic creation of a network of commercial outposts. Nevertheless, the inflow of economically more powerful strangers, equipped with technological and organizational key skills, had a revolutionizing effect on the societies of the Mediterranean periphery, first of Cyprus, then Italy, North Africa and the Iberian Peninsula. The new arrivals had no sooner set foot on foreign soil, than they had their say on all civilizational and cultural standards. The Phoenicians inspired admiration not only because of their wealth and know-how, but also because of their gods and lifestyle. Not least, their written language with its easy-to-learn alphabet was an invitation to imitate.²²

Long and stony was the path from the collapse at the end of the Bronze Age to the “world market” of the eighth and seventh centuries. Soon after 1200 BC, the city kings of the Levant realized that the newly created power vacuum gave them access to possibilities they had never had in the system of the Bronze Age. An Egyptian text of the eleventh century, the probably fictional “Report of Wenamun,” relates how Zekerbaal, the business-smart king of Byblos, sold cedar trees to Egypt, while his predecessors had only delivered them free of charge as tribute to the kingdom on the Nile. Texts of the Old Testament tell, with high esteem, of Tyre’s craftsmen, who helped King Solomon build the temple. Homer’s epic poems, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, do not deny their respect for the skilful manufacturers of fine textiles and precious vessels; on the other hand, they make no secret of the disgust felt by the Greeks for the business practices of the profit-driven and predatory merchants from the Levant. A text from the Old Testament, the Book of Isaiah, calls the traders of Tyros “merchants who conducted themselves as princes.”²³

We know little about the political and social organization of the Phoenician cities, and there is practically nothing to learn from evidence left by the Phoenicians themselves. More eloquent in this respect are sources coming from their neighbours – Egyptians, Hebrews, Assyrians, Greeks, or even Romans. How accurate the accounts of such cities as Tyre or Sidon are, is difficult to say. Greek and Roman evidence in particular should be taken very cautiously. Texts like the depiction of the siege of Tyre by Alexander the Great in Curtius Rufus (probably first century AD) and Arrian (second century AD) seem to indicate that in Tyre, there were the same political institutions as would be met in a Greek polis: a commonwealth of citizens, a *dēmos*, who voted on important questions, and a council.²⁴ Whether these are hard facts or simply analogy constructions made by authors writing long after the events, is unknown. In any case, the evidence relates to a very late period. Whether Phoenician cities of the Iron Age were organized in a similar way remains unknown.²⁵

However, two things seem to be certain: first, the essential orientation of the Phoenicians and the core of their political identity was always the city. They did not think or act as a “nation.” Bonding elements of the peoples from the Levant were language, religious beliefs and a particular commercial habitus. As with the Greeks, no political feeling of belonging together whatsoever resulted from this. Therefore, it seems reasonable to consider Tyre, Sidon and the other cities of the Levant as city-states, similar to Athens or Corinth. This does not rule out cravings for expansion: Sidon and Tyre, the largest of the Phoenician cities, rivalled each other for hegemony. Every so often, one city was tributary to the other – mostly it was Tyre which was in control of the less powerful Sidon.²⁶

Second, in the Phoenician cities, as in Carthage and other than in Greece, it was not landowners who set the tone, but long-distance traders. True to the economic *raison d’être* of the Levantine city-states, the merchants were always the ones who had the last word when it came to making political decisions. We know fairly well about Carthage, that the city’s political elite was recruited from men whose capital was invested in trading companies, while farmers and artisans had

nothing to say. Similarly, the interests of long-distance merchants seem to have been dominant in Tyre and Sidon as well. A considerable part of the resources of these cities seems to have been spent on safeguarding seafaring, opening new markets and exploiting raw materials. Which role was played here by central, as it were, “state” institutions, cannot be assessed with certainty. There is, however, good reason to believe that essentially the initiative originated from individuals who pursued their business interests with great determination.²⁷

So far with assumptions. However, Phoenician cities are unmistakably a social counterpart to the palace centres of the Bronze Age, dominated as the latter were by the great institutions, and even to the empires of the Iron Age. Being organized not vertically from top to bottom, but horizontally and with a broad layer of individual economic players, they established for the second time in history semi-global networks, but on a completely new basis. Accordingly, they laid the foundations for the colonization of the western Mediterranean coasts by the Greeks from the eighth century BC onward, and finally for the ever-increasing political, juridical, social, economic as well as cultural integration of the Mediterranean world brought about by the Roman Empire. The Greeks were not the first to sit around the Mediterranean, as Plato put it, “like frogs around a pond.”²⁸

A new era

In 332 BC, the Phoenician city of Tyre became the site of an episode of world history. The Macedonian king Alexander, who had crossed the Hellespont two years earlier, starting his great campaign to conquer the Persian Empire, wanted to make a sacrifice to the local god Melqart in the island city. The Tyrians denied him access to their town, suggesting instead a sanctuary on the mainland. The Tyrians’ attempt to maintain neutrality in the conflict between Macedonians and Persians drove Alexander to such a fury, that he besieged the city, built a causeway connecting the island to, and making it part of, the mainland, and finally conquered it.²⁹

Tyre’s conquest did not change much in the city’s commercial significance. But it paved the way for Alexander’s march towards Egypt, which became his next expansion goal. In Egypt, people became astonished witnesses to two events, which had a lasting influence on the development of the entire history of the ancient world, and which should also be of importance to Palmyra. The first event was the foundation of Alexandria, a new city built from scratch in the Nile Delta, where ever-growing numbers of people from Greece and Macedon, as well as from other parts of the ancient world, gradually settled. Alexandria thus became the first cosmopolitan metropolis of antiquity. Alexander founded Alexandria as his city. Its name was to make the glory of the conqueror immortal, and visible far and wide, like the lighthouse built by his successors later on the island of Pharos. Egyptian Alexandria became the model for dozens of other Alexander cities, which were founded wherever Macedonian soldiers set their conquering foot. And this was just the beginning. The Macedonians who followed Alexander in his conquest of Asia, founded even more cities, which they called after themselves and their family members, settling in them newcomers from the motherland, veterans

and civilians. So alongside the Near East's historically grown cities with their three-thousand-year-old tradition, a completely new city type appeared, recognizable to every visitor by its regular layout, with streets crossing each other at right angles. Certain kinds of buildings and building complexes were standard equipment as well: theatres, colonnaded streets, public squares and, naturally, sacred buildings in the classical style, with tympanum, sculpted friezes and Doric, Ionic or Corinthian peristasis. The new cities erected by the conquering Macedonians were foreign bodies in a Near Eastern environment. There was nothing which could link them urbanistically, politically or socially with the traditions of Egypt, Mesopotamia, Persia or Central Asia.³⁰

An unfamiliar kind of life expected the settlers after the move to their new home towns. The Greeks and Macedonians were separated from the cultural milieu of their motherland and were confronted with new neighbours and environments totally different from their own. Immigrants from other cultures had to deal with the social and political reality of the polis, its public sphere which was strikingly visible even in its city-planning concept, and its even more radical demand for the political participation of all citizens. Old certainties faded and had to be replaced by new self-assurances; safety and comfort of traditional communities – family, clan, tribe – gave way to new forms of emancipation, but also to anonymity and uncertainty.³¹

The second event had possibly an even deeper impact than the founding of Alexandria. In 331 BC, Alexander visited the oracle of the god Amun in the oasis of Siwa, far west in Egypt. According to the tradition of the Nile kingdom, every newly inaugurated Pharaoh visited Amun for a blessing from its oracle. The Egyptian god, however, was no stranger among the Greeks either: they identified Amun with their Zeus. The oracle at Siwa enjoyed the highest prestige in Hellas, and was no less in demand than the native sanctuaries of Delphi and Dodona. Therefore there was nothing out of the ordinary when Alexander paid his respects to the god. Who could have blamed him for trying to take up the tradition of the Pharaohs, so that he could present himself to the Egyptians as one of their worthy rulers? Yet Alexander went a crucial step further. The historian Diodorus Siculus reports on the event:³²

When Alexander was conducted by the priests into the temple and had regarded the god for a while, the one who held the position of prophet, an elderly man, came to him and said, "Rejoice, son; take this form of address as from the god also." He replied, "I accept, father; for the future I shall be called thy son. But tell me if thou givest me the rule of the whole earth." The priest now entered the sacred enclosure and as the bearers now lifted the god and were moved according to certain prescribed sounds of the voice, the prophet cried that of a certainty the god had granted him his request.

What exactly is going on here can no longer be reconstructed with certainty. Apparently, it was part of the oracle's ritual, that the god himself gave a physical

sign of his will. The fact that the sign was brought about by bearers moving his image does not seem to have put off either Alexander or Diodorus, who wrote in the first century BC. It is remarkable that Alexander was prophesied as world's ruler and was addressed as the son of the god Amun right before his decisive victory over the Persian king at Gaugamela. It cannot be the case that both events were a sudden inspiration of Siwa's priests. We may be sure that Alexander arrived in Siwa with a clearly defined plan. He came as king of the Macedonians and left as son of god, who had been promised the world domination.³³

What a stage setting! Siwa, like the founding of Alexandria, marks the turn of an era, though only on a symbolic, not material, level. In Siwa, Alexander's intention of imposing his political will on the Near East becomes manifest. The empires of the river-valley civilizations are definitely history, the future belongs to the men from the West. But while the East becomes subject to the West, the West submits to the East too. The process is slow and less conspicuous than the brutal subjugation of the Persian Empire, effected with military force by Alexander until 330 BC. But it is no less groundbreaking, leaving hardly any more of the traditional polities of Macedon and Greece than did Alexander's campaign from the Persian Empire. Around the sentiment of being the son of a god, clearly signifying the king's divinity – which up to that moment had never been found in the Greek kingdom of ideas – was centred a political thought that now contaminated the West as well.

Alexander's subjugation of Egypt exemplarily demonstrates the process of conquest of one civilization by another. It is not the case that the victor leaves only rubble and wreckage behind. Learning and inspiration are by no means one-way streets: it is nowhere postulated that in the future, the subjugated people will have to lead the way of life the conquerors do. The new masters rather presented an offer to the Egyptians, which they could accept or reject. In any case, for the vast majority, everyday life may have changed relatively little. For a certain percentage of the local population, however, opportunities offered themselves, which had previously been closed to them. On the other hand, Greeks and Macedonians did not remain the same as they were when they came into the country. Alexander's becoming a god in Siwa is the best example: as in the world he had conquered nothing remained the same as before, so was the king no longer the same.

The world after Alexander

Alexander died in Babylon on 10 June 323 BC. During the ten years that had passed since his first great victory over the Persian king Dareios, he had destroyed the latter's empire; had crossed the Oxos in Central Asia, passed through the Hindukush and the forests of India; had sent his soldiers on a death march through the Gedrosian Desert and had forged plans for the conquest of the Arab Peninsula, perhaps even Italy. Alexander was the destroyer of a world empire, but he did not build one of his own. There has never been an "Alexandrian Empire." It is an invention of posterity. The task of establishing new empires on the ruins of the

old ones was left to his successors, for whom he had predicted, on his deathbed, an epic struggle for his inheritance. When asked who should be his heir, he is reported to have answered, “the strongest.”³⁴

It took the lifespan of a whole generation for the territorial conquests of the world, which would be called “the Hellenistic world” for the first time by the historian Johann Gustav Droysen (1808–1884), to consolidate to a certain degree. Three great empires emerged from the bloody conflicts that arose after Alexander’s death: the Antigonid Empire in Macedon, the Seleucid Empire in Asia and the Ptolemaic Empire in Egypt. In addition, there was a handful of middle-sized states, which tried to survive by manoeuvring between the great powers: Rhodes, Pergamon, the Aetolian League and the Achaean League in Greece, as well as the ancient poleis of Athens and Sparta, whose strength by this time had been largely exhausted.

The great powers in particular were almost permanently involved in a Cold War, which would repeatedly erupt into severe warfare. The disputed bone of contention between the Seleucids and the Ptolemies was Syria. It was a matter of prestige, but also of tangible economic interests. Who owned Syria, had control over Phoenicia and the caravan routes in the hinterland. The Levantine coast was still the hub of Mediterranean trade, the crucial commercial intersection between the Mediterranean and the Near East. Syria was particularly important because long-distance trade in Hellenism had gained enormous momentum. Instead of the small city and tribal states, now empires dominated the scene in the eastern Mediterranean. The great empires maintained royal courts and had elites, which outshone everything preceding them. Metropolises such as Alexandria in Egypt, Antioch in Syria or Seleukeia in Babylonia had a spending capacity that even big poleis like Athens or Corinth had never possessed.

The rich and the mighty asked constantly for new luxury goods.³⁵ How could status be better demonstrated than with objects which were prohibitively expensive? And what could be more expensive than rare and exotic goods? Exotic were pearls, jewels, ivory, spices and all came from countries far from the Mediterranean, from India or inland Africa. By far the most exotic commodity was silk, which was produced in distant China and had come into contact with the Greeks and Macedons through Alexander, and possibly even before him, through the Persians. Silk was negotiated through several intermediate trading posts, via India, to the West. The west coast of the Indian subcontinent was a unique shopping mile of luxury: seaports were closely lined up along the shore, offering goods which literally were torn from merchants’ hands in the far West.³⁶ The fact that it was possible to transport them by sea into the Mediterranean was due to the enormous growth of geographical knowledge, particularly concerning the exploitation of the monsoon winds. Their importance had already been discovered at the end of the sixth century BC by the Greek geographer Skylax, who had been in Persia’s service. The Ptolemaic admiral Philon had systematically explored the shores of the Red Sea in 300 BC. In 277 BC, the *nauarchos* Pythagoras sailed along the coast of Arabia. In the meantime, in Alexandria, the most famous scholars

of their time worked out a whole new image of the planet Earth: in the late third century BC, Eratosthenes of Cyrene not only proved the spherical shape of the earth, but calculated its circumference, albeit though not accurately. He was also the creator of a new world map on a mathematical basis, in which he incorporated the current knowledge of the physical form of distant countries, which had greatly expanded since Alexander the Great. This kind of theoretical knowledge enabled sailors and merchants to make the leap across the Indian Ocean.³⁷

The newly created possibilities due to the expansion of geographical knowledge, are documented by a unique text, which in its present form probably dates back to the middle of the first century AD, though essentially it is much older, possibly from the second century BC, when the sea route to India still led along the coasts of Arabia and Persia. The so-called *Periplus Maris Erythraei* is a handbook for seafaring merchants, and, as told in its title, is a guide to the "circumnavigation" (*periplus*) of the Indian Ocean (*mare Erythraeum*). It meticulously catalogues the ports on the coasts of the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean,³⁸ the goods offered and demanded in each of them, as well as the distances to be covered by ships sailing along the coasts of Arabia, India and Africa. In addition, the interested merchant finds useful information about plants and animals. Ethnographic information seems to be indispensable, for the reader will of course want to know where to expect an unfriendly reception. Well equipped with information, traders were able to choose the ports of call where they could best sell their merchandise and acquire the goods they were interested in. The area covered by the *Periplus* is astonishingly large: it stretches from Egypt to the south, along the east coast of Africa, up to today's Tanzania; in the east, up to India's southern tip and even beyond, up to the estuary area of the Ganges.³⁹

At the turn of the second century BC, the Ptolemies lost Syria definitively to the Seleucids, and with it their influence on the land-based Transeurasian long-distance trade too. The new geostrategic situation prompted Alexandria to eagerly keep an eye on alternatives. Around 150 BC, the southern extension of the Indian subcontinent was fairly well-known in the West, which was an important prerequisite for the ships to dare crossing the ocean without fear of sailing past India. Soon after, the monsoon passage was rediscovered. Towards the end of the century, Eudoxos of Kyzikos navigated the sea route from the Red Sea around the Arabian Peninsula and then straight on to India. He probably passed on his knowledge to a certain Hippalos, who is regarded by Pliny as the discoverer of the direct sea route to India.⁴⁰ In the late summer, before the monsoon, ships could sail to India in just over two months. The return trip started in December, when the monsoon blew from the east. So, with a regular annual rhythm, a whole fleet of merchant ships sailed to India and back, people from the Mediterranean settled down in the ports of the Indian west coast and goods of priceless value found their way across the Indian Ocean.⁴¹

The extent and volume of merchandise traffic between India and the West had, until recently, been greatly underestimated. It is testified to not only by innumerable shipwrecks and finds from India itself, which are becoming ever-more

abundant, but also by another text document, which does not originate from the Hellenistic, but from the Roman period. The document is a loan contract concluded in the second century AD in the Indian port of Muziris. Such “maritime loans” were common practice, since hardly any merchant possessed enough capital to pre-finance long-distance merchandise on a large scale. The front side of the Muziris papyrus contains the conditions under which the loan is granted, a safeguard clause and, especially interesting, a detailed itinerary, though only its last part is preserved, of the route taken from the Red Sea through the desert to the Nile, and from there downstream to Alexandria. Even more instructive is the reverse side, on which the goods and their value are listed: the merchant transported nard, a medicinal plant from the Himalayas, used in the production of oils and balms, as well as ivory and textiles – presumably silk, judging from the high price. The cargo had a total value of over 1,150 talents converted into no less than seven million denarii. Considering that the annual pay of a legionary in the second century AD did not surpass 500 denarii, it becomes clear what staggering values were moved by a single ship across the Indian Ocean. Moreover, it is easy to see who were the other people involved in making profits from this trade: bankers, agents, sailors, camel-drivers, tribal chiefs whose territory was crossed by the caravans and, not least, the state. As much as 25 per cent of the merchandise value was drawn by the imperial fiscal authority in Alexandria in the guise of taxes.⁴²

The text is a unique document testifying to the interconnection between such different areas as the Mediterranean and the Indian subcontinent. The linkage had progressed very quickly, and, in the Roman period, the Indian Ocean was no longer a dividing desert of water, but the hub of a long-distance trade enveloping all of the Eurasian continent and crosslinking its borders. To be sure, the Muziris papyrus provides only a snapshot from the Roman imperial period, the pieces of evidence as a whole, however, reveal that Alexander’s conquest of the East meant a qualitative breakthrough for the interconnection of the Mediterranean area with the vast world of Eurasia, and that the following three centuries significantly intensified the contact. This development left its traces on the Mediterranean itself, where the volume of sea trade grew steadily, as documented by findings of shipwrecks. The shipwreck database of the *Oxford Roman Economy Project*

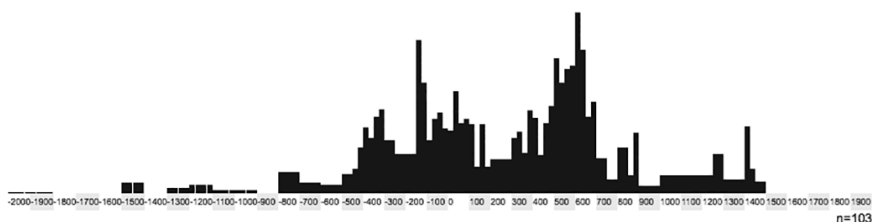


Figure 3.1 Shipwrecks in the eastern Mediterranean, 2000 BC–AD 2000

shows a steep rise in the eastern Mediterranean for the period around 200 BC (Figure 3.1). The amount of ship traffic in that area, as reflected in the wrecks, remained high until the imperial period of the Roman Empire.⁴³

The world after Alexander the Great was fundamentally different from the one preceding him. Europe was no longer simply the appendix of a Near East which was by far superior in terms of civilization, economy and military. It was variously embedded in a Eurasian system, whose two flanks, the Mediterranean and the Far East, were interconnected by way of India and the Indian Ocean. Socio-political upheavals in one edge of the system – like the triumph of great territorial monarchies after Alexander – led to measurable consequences at the opposite end, namely in China at the time of the Han emperors, where from the late third century BC, the proto-industrial production of silk reached its first peak.⁴⁴ The key to East's riches was first held by Egypt, with its Red Sea ports commanding the maritime trade through the Indian Ocean, at first along the coasts, later on via the monsoon passage right across the ocean. In the Hellenistic period the Near East, Syria included, played a secondary role at best.

Endgame for Syria

The Seleucids had succeeded Alexander in the Near East. The founder of the dynasty, Seleukos, had commanded Alexander's Royal Guards, and after his demise in Babylon and various battles, had secured for himself the largest chunk of Alexander's territory. He rightly called himself Nikator, the "victor." The kingdom of Seleukos and his successors stretched from southern Asia Minor in the West to India. The core countries of the Empire were Babylonia and Syria. In southern Mesopotamia, agriculture continued, as ever, to be enormously productive, generating the economic basis for the Empire and its cities. The Seleucids created here a series of cities of the polis kind, the most important of which was Seleukeia on the Tigris, founded by Seleukos Nikator on the right bank of the river in 305 BC. The city was not far from ancient Babylon, at the intersection of various trade routes. Among other things, not far from Seleukeia, the "king's canal" branched off, connecting the Tigris with the Euphrates. According to ancient records, the majority of the hundreds of thousands of settlers was apparently made up of Macedonians, followed by Greeks, Syrians, Jews, and inhabitants of the surrounding Mesopotamian cities.⁴⁵ The city had certainly a multicultural character, politically it was nevertheless a polis with citizens and appropriate institutions, a council and various magistracies.⁴⁶ The architecture was at least partly modelled on Western examples. There was a heroon (a shrine) and a theatre, as well as a cult for the Seleucid king. The inhabitants were, even in the Parthian era, still proud to dress like Greeks.⁴⁷

In addition to Seleukeia, there were some smaller Macedonian-founded settlements in Babylon as well, including one Alexandria⁴⁸ and at least two cities called Apameia in Charakene, the estuary area of the Euphrates and Tigris.⁴⁹

Above all, many immigrants from the West poured into already existing cities like Babylon and Uruk. Here, apparently, although these cities did not become poleis, Greco-Macedonian civic associations (*politeumata*) constituted themselves with far-reaching autonomy rights with respect to their social environment. Due to deficient data, it is hardly possible to assess the influence of these people on local society. For most locals, however, everyday life does not seem to have changed significantly. The rhythms of social and religious life still went with the pace of traditions, which on Alexander's arrival were already thousands of years old. The local elites were indispensable cooperation partners for the new rulers. For this reason they almost all retained their religious, economic and political key positions.⁵⁰ Moreover, Seleucid rule lasted only comparatively briefly.

Quite different was the case in Syria. Here the contacts with the West had already been more intense, even before Alexander, and the cultural proximity greater. Above all, the influx of settlers from Greece and Macedon had quite different proportions. Demography and settlement structure of the country between the Mediterranean and the Euphrates were turned upside down, the new city type of the polis was much more successful than in Mesopotamia. In addition, the focus of urban life shifted from the Phoenician coast to northern Syria. Here, Seleukos and his successors founded the biggest agglomeration of Greek cities outside the home country. The four most significant – Antioch on the Orontes, Laodikeia by the sea, Seleukeia in Pieria and Apameia in Syria, made up the so called “Tetrapolis,” an urban landscape with its very own character and above all an outpost of Greek culture in the midst of a completely different environment.⁵¹

The four cities took up most of the settlers from Greece and Macedon. The core of their population – especially of the local elites – consisted of newcomers. Founded by Seleukos Nikator in 300 BC, Antioch first absorbed the population of the previous colony, Antigonía. It was soon joined by migrants coming from Macedon and Athens, and later, in the second century BC, from Euboea, Aetolia and Crete. Like Alexandria, the city was structured on the basis of ethnic and cultural boundaries, but it also reflected the different waves of immigration in its urban layout. The core of the town, founded by Seleukos, sheltered the first settlers; a second quarter was reserved for the native Syrian population; a third was created under Seleukos II, in the middle of the third century; and finally a fourth under Antiochos IV, after the Roman expansion in the Greek homeland had triggered an escape wave. These were joined by a Jewish community which was not insignificant.⁵²

Even in its physical form, the city looked like a foreign body compared to its surroundings. A grid of rectangularly intersecting streets was surrounded by an equally rectangular wall. According to the principle of democratic city planning, the residential area consisted of largely uniform court houses, which varied only slightly in size. In the geographical centre of the city, there were public squares and buildings. The architect Hippodamos of Miletos had devised this city plan in the fifth century BC and implemented it in his home town. Now enthusiastic imitators were following his example wherever Greeks and Macedonians built new cities on conquered soil.⁵³ The contrast to the traditional town planning of the

Near East could not have been sharper. The rectangular layout, as an expression of rational planning, was just as revolutionary a novelty as the democratic idea of equality, which were both articulated in the form of the houses. Particularly innovative was the concept of public space, which entered the Syrian urban landscape with the Macedonians.⁵⁴

The uniformity, indeed interchangeability, of the new cities was, after all, a new and downright invasive appearance. Anyone who could find their way in one, was at their ease in each of the others. Buildings' and urban ensembles' functions could be guessed at from particular, established features. Architects deliberately aimed for the recognition value of their architecture. Its canonical elements appeared, in spite of the ever-differing combinations, in an almost overpowering repetition and always in the same form. Columns, capitals, entablatures, friezes and all other kinds of decoration were reduced to their symbolic value, which was as unmistakably Greek, as the language and mindset of their builders.⁵⁵ So the Tetrapolis, with as many as four cities, each based on a uniform urban planning and building design, set on an irregular square of just 60 kilometres of side length, was a powerful demonstration of Greco-Macedonian presence in the conquered country. The new rulers' declared willingness to physically leave their mark upon the land, can also be detected in the cadastral survey of large areas, whose traces are even now still visible in the countryside around Damascus and near Aleppo. What becomes evident here, is not only the fundamental rearrangement of ownership structure, from which of course Greek and Macedonian settlers profited, but also the endeavour to make a rational system of order visible in space by creating new paths and field boundaries.⁵⁶

The Tetrapolis' urban landscape with its fertile hinterland, the unprecedented population concentration and the influential Greco-Macedonian element, was, even more than Babylonia, the true heart of the Seleucid Empire. Both core regions are connected by the river course of the Euphrates, which in Syria describes a broad bend to the west, and at the time, going downriver from the mouth of the Ḥābūr, was navigable with light vehicles of shallow draft.⁵⁷

The Seleucids safeguarded this commercially and strategically vital hub with a range of cities, in which they settled people on whose loyalty they could count in need. These cities were also named after representatives of the dynasty, or after the Macedonian homeland of most of the settlers: Seleukeia on the Euphrates (Zeugma), Europos in Syria (ancient Karkemish), Nikephorion-Kallinikon (ancient Tuttul, late-antique Leontopolis and today's ar-Raqqa), and finally Europos in Mesopotamia, whose name had previously been Dura, and which is therefore today mostly called Dura-Europos. Many of these cities were already in existence when a conquering Alexander roamed over the country, receiving under the Seleucids contingents, of varying size, of Macedonian and Greek settlers. These cities were considerably smaller than the metropolises of the Tetrapolis and, true to their role, functioned rather as advanced outposts than lighthouses of Hellenization. But even a city like Dura-Europos, which could by no means be compared to large cities such as Apameia or Antioch, had a

generously dimensioned Hippodamian street grid and public areas. Just like the Antiochians, the inhabitants of the city on the middle Euphrates were proud of their Greek culture, their language, and the city founder, Seleukos Nikator, who was ritually honoured as a hero. Again like their cousins in the Orontes city, who worshipped their city goddess in the form of a widely famous sculpture by Eutychides, the inhabitants of Dura-Europos possessed a Tyche, a feminine personification of their city.⁵⁸

Babylonia was finally lost to the Seleucids after a long struggle, in 129 BC, when Antiochos VII was defeated by the Parthian King Phraates II, and the Parthians took possession of the strongholds on the Euphrates. The conquest had been preceded by the Seleucids' gradual loss of substance in the eastern part of their Empire, which could no longer be halted, in spite of periodic efforts to recapture it, especially under Antiochos III Megas (223–187 BC) and Antiochos VII Euergetes (138–129 BC). More and more satraps pursued their own interests, small rulers detached their dominions from the Empire, and an Iranian tribe, the Parthians, made its debut, and set on building an empire in central Asia and soon after expanding towards the West.⁵⁹ At the same time, signs of decay were afflicting the Seleucids in the West too. In the Fifth Syrian War they had indeed succeeded in winning the fight for Syria and Palestine, and in subjecting the Levant to their full control. But the joy of the victory over the Ptolemies did not last long. Shattered by the catastrophic defeat against Rome in the so-called Antiochos War (192–188 BC) and by internal dynastic rivalries, the Seleucid rule lost its power of integration in the West as well. In the Maccabean uprising (from 165 BC), a part of the Jewish elite revoked their allegiance to the Seleucids. Judea sank into unrest and war until the Seleucids in 134 BC finally granted a far-reaching autonomy to the priestly dynasty of the Hasmoneans.⁶⁰

How the gradual disintegration of the Seleucid Empire affected long-distance trade in the Near East can only be assumed, due to lack of sources. That the division of the region along the Euphrates into two political spheres strained the land-based exchange of goods between the Mediterranean and the Persian Gulf, if not stifled it, is at least a plausible assumption.⁶¹ It cannot be ruled out that the new political situation stimulated the search for alternative routes. The re-discovery of the monsoon passage could also be part of this context, as well as the rapid, hard-to-explain boom experienced by Petra, the settlement in modern Jordan, from the late second century BC onward. Out of a nomadic campsite, within decades, a significant city was born. The nomadic tribe of the Nabataeans, living in the area around Petra, became a local power factor, successfully asserting themselves against the Seleucid and the Ptolemaic claim to domination.⁶² So there are indications suggesting that with the change of the political situation, the caravan route through Mesopotamia was replaced by alternative trade routes – via Petra and the Gulf of Aqaba, or across the Nile and through the Egyptian desert to the Red Sea and around Arabia to the Indian Ocean. Finally, the first tentative beginnings of Palmyrene long-distance trade, which seem to date to this period, may be directly connected with the political splitting of the Near East, and this is the start of another story.

Notes

- 1 The absolute chronology of the Near Eastern Bronze Age is highly controversial. This history uses the so-called “middle” chronology. Cf. Hans Jörg Nissen, *Geschichte Alt-Vorderasiens*, 2nd ed., vol. 25, Grundriss der Geschichte (München: Oldenbourg Verlag, 2012), 243–51.
- 2 Herfried Münkler, *Empires. The Logic of World Domination from Ancient Rome to the United States* (Malden, MA: Polity, 2007). For this as applied to the Near East cf. Michael Sommer, “Hatra – imperiale und regionale Herrschaft an der Steppengrenze,” *Klio* 85 (2003): 51.
- 3 Mario Liverani, *Akkad, the First World Empire. Structure, Ideology, Traditions* (Padova: Sargon, 1993); Nissen, 25, 60–65; Marc Van de Mieroop, *A History of the Ancient Near East. Ca. 3000–323 BC*, 2nd ed., Blackwell History of the Ancient World (Malden, MA; Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), 64–73.
- 4 Horst Klengel, *Zwischen Zelt und Palast. Die Begegnung von Nomaden und Sesshaften im alten Vorderasien* (Wien: Schroll, 1972), 43.
- 5 Johannes Renger, “Vergangenes Geschehen in der Textüberlieferung des alten Mesopotamien,” in *Vergangenheit und Lebenswelt. Soziale Kommunikation, Traditionsbildung und historisches Bewußtsein*, ed. Hans-Joachim Gehrke and Astrid Möller (Tübingen: Gunter Narr, 1996), 35–36.
- 6 Mario Liverani, *The Ancient Near East. History, Society and Economy* (London: Routledge, 2013), 61–80.
- 7 Nina Jidejian, *Byblos through the Ages* (Beirut: Dar el-Machreq 1968), 19; Michael Sommer, *Die Phönizier. Handelsherren zwischen Orient und Okzident* (Stuttgart: Alfred Kröner, 2005), 15; Erwin J. Wein and Ruth Opificius, *7000 Jahre Byblos* (Nürnberg: Hans Carl, 1963), 10–18.
- 8 Moshe Elat, “Der tamkaru im neuassyrischen Reich,” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 30 (1987); Liverani, *Ancient Near East*, 207–20.
- 9 Gojko Barjamovic, “The geography of trade. Assyrian colonies in Anatolia c. 1975–1725 BC and the study of early interregional networks of exchange,” in *Anatolia and the Jazira during the Old Assyrian period*, ed. J Dercksen, Old Assyrian Archives Studies (Leiden: Nederlands Instituut door het Nabije Osten); Liverani, *Ancient Near East*, 207–20.
- 10 Van de Mieroop, *A History of the Ancient Near East*, 98.
- 11 Max Weber, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft. Die Stadt*, vol. 22,5, Studienausgabe der Max Weber-Gesamtausgabe. Abt. 1, Schriften und Reden (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 2000), 108: “In a ‘consumer city,’ purchasing power originates from revenues of a patrimonial or political nature, from the means of a ruler (‘Fürstenstadt’) or from a range of sources of income: rent charges, capital yield or government pensions (‘Grundrentnerstadt,’ ‘Rentnerstadt’)” (translation Michael Sommer).
- 12 Karl Polanyi, “The economy as an instituted process,” in *Trade and Market in the Early Empires. Economies in History and Theory*, ed. Karl Polanyi, Conrad M. Arensberg and Harry W. Pearson (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1957), 253: “Redistribution obtains within a group to the extent to which the allocation of goods is collected in one hand and takes place by virtue of custom, law or ad hoc central decision.”
- 13 For an overview Marc Van de Mieroop, “Economic theories and the Ancient Near East,” in *Commerce and Monetary Systems in the Ancient World. Means of Transmission and Cultural Interaction*, ed. Robert Rollinger and Christoph Ulf, Oriens et Occidens (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 2004).
- 14 Polanyi, “The economy as an instituted process,” 262.
- 15 The classic treatise on gift exchange is: Marcel Mauss, “Essai sur le don. Forme et raison de l’échange dans les sociétés archaïques,” *Annales Sociologiques n.s.* 1 (1923/24). Cf. Alvin W. Gouldner, “The norm of reciprocity. A preliminary statement,” *American Sociological Review* 25 (1960); Marcel Hénaff, “Is there such a thing as a gift economy?”

- in *Gift Giving and the 'Embedded' Economy in the Ancient World*, ed. Filippo Carlà and Maja Gori (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2014); David Reinstein, "The economics of the gift," *ibid.*
- 16 Key to understanding the concept is still, after 70 years, Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1944). Cf. Michael Sommer, *Wirtschaftsgeschichte der Antike* (München: C. H. Beck, 2013), 30–38. On Polanyi's economic anthropology, its intellectual roots in the German school of economics and the Bücher-Meyer controversy: Moses I. Finley, *The Bücher-Meyer controversy* (New York: Arno Press, 1979); Helmuth Schneider, "Die Bücher-Meyer Kontroverse," in *Eduard Meyer. Leben und Leistung eines Universalhistorikers*, ed. William M. Calder III and Alexander Demandt (Leiden: Brill, 1990); Beate Wagner-Hasel, "Karl Bücher and the birth of the theory of gift-giving," in *Gift Giving and the 'Embedded' Economy in the Ancient World*, ed. Filippo Carlà and Maja Gori (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2014).
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4 *Privata sorte inter duo imperia*

Palmyra between Rome and Parthia

After the defeat against the Parthians in 129 BC, the Seleucid Empire sank in agony, Syria into a long period of chaos. Weak kings, who were dependent on foreign powers, and more often than not were in competition with one another, took turns as rulers. Parts of Syria, as well as Asia Minor, became war zones. The cities wrested always farther-reaching autonomy rights from the centre. In the power vacuum created between the Mediterranean and the Euphrates, the interests of various regional and supra-regional powers clashed against each other: the kingdom of Pontos under its ambitious and persevering king Mithradates VI Eupator (c. 120–63 BC); the kingdom of Armenia, ruled by Mithradates' son-in-law Tigranes II (c. 95–55 BC); the Parthian Empire of the Arsacids; the Ptolemaic Empire in Egypt, and finally the Roman Empire. At the crossing point of all these hegemonic aspirations, in the middle of the Syrian Desert and in the eye of the storm, lay Palmyra, preparing itself for a debut in world history.

Palmyra: the Hellenistic city

For a long time, research groped in the dark concerning the beginnings of the classical settlement of Palmyra. Evidence dating from the pre-Christian era had mainly been delivered by the exploratory work undertaken under the leadership of Count Du Mesnil du Buisson after the Second World War in the area of the Temple of Bēl. It showed that this sanctuary, consecrated in AD 32 in the early imperial period, stands on a preceding building, which dates back at least to the first century BC. This is substantiated by an inscription in an archaic Palmyrene language, dated to the year 269 of the Seleucid era (44 BC), and found incorporated in a wall where spolia from the older temple had been reused. The inscription belonged to a statue erected by the “Priests of Bēl” to a certain Guraimi (*Igrymy*), son of Nebouzabados (*nbwzbd*), from the tribe *khnbwl*.¹ When the preceding building was built, whether in the first century or, possibly, much earlier, is as puzzling as the question of whether the temple which was consecrated in AD 32 represents more or less a seamless continuation of its predecessor, or whether it marks the beginning of a completely new architectural style, for which the older temple was demolished.²

In addition, until the first century BC, there was a necropolis at the site of the later Temple of Ba'al-Šamen, which was documented as early as in the second century BC. Findings from the tombs, including coins and oil lamps, make dating possible, and at the same time allow for cautious conclusions about Palmyra's early interconnection with its surroundings. Some of the oil lamps, as well as domestic pottery, come from the West, from the Levant, some pieces even from Egypt, whereas alabaster makeup pallets originate from the Parthian area, showing that Hellenistic Palmyra apparently maintained contacts to the East and to the West. In contrast to similar buildings in the Seleucid centres, the walls of the burial site were made of air-dried mud bricks. Stone plates were used only to close the loculi from the outside.³

This proved that the oasis was inhabited in the second century and was in contact with the outside world, but no more than that. Our knowledge of early Palmyra has grown tremendously since then, however, through an extensive archaeological project – the last of its kind before the beginning of the Syrian civil war in 2011 – involving many teams from abroad. From 1997 to 2010, archaeologists from Syria, Germany and Austria worked on an area measuring 20 hectares in the south-west of Palmyra. The so-called Hellenistic city is located in a triangle, which is bordered by the wadi to the north, the necropolis to the west and the road to Damascus to the south-east. Here, between the city of the imperial period and the palm gardens of the oasis, there was a densely populated, dynamically growing urban district until the first century AD. Later, Palmyra's centre shifted to the area north of the wadi. The building activity in the Hellenistic city slowed down, until several major building projects were carried out during the Severan period, from the second century AD onwards.⁴

The excavation started from the premise that Tadmur was not only inhabited in pre-Christian times, but “already in pre-Roman times, that is, in the 3rd to first centuries BC, a significant settlement must have existed in Palmyra.”⁵ The goal was to undertake a systematic investigation of the area based on remains of masonry on the surface, in order to gain insight into the function, size and chronology of the town quarter presumed to be underneath it. For this purpose, a geophysical prospection with a magnetometer was carried out from 1997 to 1998, followed by an excavation with two trial trenches. The findings were taken to the museum of Palmyra, the showpieces were extensively restored and made accessible to the public in 2010 in a permanent exhibition.⁶

The geophysical prospection was at first carried out on the ground by means of a magnetometer and resistivity surveying. This methodology allowed for the exploration of building structures on a large scale, with relatively little effort and in a minimally invasive way. The findings reveal three clearly recognizable roads, which meet at the V-shaped crossroads at the eastern edge of the survey area. Contrary to expectation, there was no compact development near the intersection area, in spite of its importance for the traffic. The northern axis, roughly aligned in an east–westerly direction, is the inner-city extension of the road leading through the Valley of the Tombs to Emesa. It runs parallel to the wadi, at a distance of 70 to 100 metres to its south. The two southern roads,

with their course from west–south–west to east–north–east, extend the road from Damascus and are connected by several parallel side roads. Under the northernmost of these two streets (“the main street”), a water line is clearly visible in the excavation, but not in the geomagnetic survey.

The main street divides the city quarter into two distinct areas. The so-called “northern quarter” is distinguished by sparsely-set buildings, with large courtyard houses. Particularly striking here is a large building made of limestone and mud-brick, with numerous rooms, the so-called “Khan.” The archaeologists chose this complex for their trial trench II. Further north, in the wadi area, foundations of large buildings were found as well, but they were quite blurred. Some scholars assume that regularly occurring floods caused considerable damage, so that the area was finally abandoned and overlaid by river sediments.

By contrast, the “southern quarter,” bordering on the central street on its southern side, is characterized by small, densely packed building units which stretch along the two major axes and their secondary roads. These buildings, unlike the “Khan” in the “northern quarter,” were built entirely of mud bricks. Only the foundations consisted of limestone. Trial trench I was dug at the point where the central main street crossed one of its side streets. In the west, this intensively used city district bordered on a wide space largely free of findings, which has been interpreted as an undeveloped area. The space may have been used only temporarily, serving as a camping site for camels. Still further to the west, it is met by the city walls, which stand out clearly in the findings.⁷

Owing to the impossibility of doing field work in Palmyra after the outbreak of the civil war, researchers from the University of Munich, in cooperation with the Bavarian cultural heritage authority and the German Aerospace Center, have continued work, since 2011, with the so-called remote sensing. For this satellite-based survey, high-resolution photographs of the US remote-sensing satellite WorldView 2 and radar images of the German radar satellite TerraSAR-X were used, which have a resolution of up to one metre. The results confirm the data obtained by ground prospection and excavation work in situ. In particular, the streets and the location of the large houses in the northern quarter are clearly visible on the satellite photographs.⁸

Both trial trenches were used to verify the data collected by geophysical prospection. In addition, a chronological framework for the city district south of the wadis was to be determined and, under functional and technical aspects, the archaeological context of the exposed structures was to be examined.⁹ Trench I was dug in the central part of the main street, at the point where it crosses one of the intersecting streets. A “Hellenistic” and an “Augustan-imperial” usage can be clearly distinguished in this area. The oldest architectural findings date back to the late third century BC. Mud-brick buildings with quarry-stone foundations were built at this time in the area where the main street was later laid. The walls were plastered and show remnants of wall paintings. Under the main street, there was also a 15-metre deep well from the first half of the second century BC.¹⁰ Adjacent to it and to the south, the archaeologists came across findings which indicate a lively trading activity: stamped imported amphorae from Rhodes¹¹ and Hellenistic fine

pottery (the so-called “moldmade bowls”) from the Greek homeland. Generally, the pottery, but other finds (lamps) as well, demonstrate strong connections to sites across the eastern Mediterranean. From about 150 BC, Mesopotamia’s ever-growing influence becomes noticeable even in the imported goods.¹²

Around the middle of the century, the southern part of the trench was sealed with a multi-layer paving of mud bricks. Some time later on – the buildings in the north had in the meanwhile disappeared – an aqueduct was laid out with clay pipes. Nevertheless, the well went on being used. In the first century BC, walls were finally built to the south of the area. Weaving weights were found as well, indicating weaving activity. In the Augustan period, the area of trench I was completely reshaped: the road was laid, the well closed, larger buildings of plastered mud bricks with foundations of quarry stones were built. The area was intensively used during the entire early imperial period, then declined in the second century, before construction activities took place once again in Severan times. From the middle of the third century, the trench area became completely deserted.¹³

It was only much later that settlement began in the area explored by trench II. Here, six ancient building phases can be distinguished, only two of which precede the Roman imperial period. Rudimentarily preserved masonry of mud bricks dates to the middle of the first century BC; later on, in the second building phase, the layout of an obviously very narrow house can be distinguished, which can also only fragmentarily be reconstructed. From this time, there are also a sewer and a well. It was not before the third building phase, in the Augustan period, that the Hellenistic house was expanded into a monumental complex built around a courtyard. The house was built in solid stone construction and had a roof terrace. The courtyard was paved and surrounded by a peristasis. This building burned down completely in the second century AD. In its place a new court house with the same layout was erected, which was decorated with rich murals and stucco ornaments. This house was used till late antiquity.¹⁴ From the later occupancy phases, a rich pottery inventory (“caravanserai pottery”) has survived, which shows the owner to be a rich merchant engaged in long-distance trade.¹⁵

The findings from the two trenches clearly show that in the oasis of Tadmur, people resided with a certain continuity. Buildings made of mud bricks had already been erected in the so-called Hellenistic city in the first half of the third century BC. We are completely in the dark, however, as to how permanent and how great the settlement was at this early stage. The findings from the trenches are much too isolated to draw further conclusions. The settlement of the second century, however, had much clearer outlines. At the time, a well of considerable depth was built – an effort which can only be justified by the permanent presence of people. In the first century BC at the latest, the Hellenistic city had all the features of an urban district.

Pottery is of paramount importance. On the one hand, it suggests that the oasis maintained close ties with the Levant. Pottery goods were imported from there or imitated locally. The finds of stamped amphorae from Rhodes also suggest that at least in the second century BC Palmyra was connected to the trading network of the eastern Mediterranean. This is not surprising, in view of the

political situation and the multifarious interweaving of Hellenistic states with each other. It is remarkable, however, that imported goods from Mesopotamia begin to accumulate from around 150 BC. Interestingly, in addition to glazed “Parthian” pottery, vessels typologically modelled on western examples (the so-called “Eastern Sigillata A”) are increasingly found. The curve of Mesopotamian imported pottery soars again steeply during the Roman Imperial period, especially in the second century AD.¹⁶

There is still no explanation regarding the very close coincidence in time between Mesopotamia’s final conquest by the Parthians in 129 BC and the first influx of Mesopotamian pottery to Palmyra “from about 150 BC.”¹⁷ If the working hypothesis is correct, according to which the detachment of the Mesopotamian territories from the Seleucid Empire permanently damaged, even stifled, the Near Eastern trade plied over Syria, Babylonia and the Persian Gulf, then the opposite should be expected.¹⁸ Why, then, did the contact between Palmyra and Mesopotamia intensify precisely at a time when wars were devastating the region, and the political climate was anything but favourable to regulated trade?

The Parthians and the steppe frontier

If we want to have answers, we have to look for them in the specific constellation of the period around and after 129 BC. The main players in the process are the Parthians, who in the third century BC had first shaken off Seleucid rule in their East-Iranian home, and then set up a series of conquest campaigns against the Seleucid Empire. A semi-mythical ancestor of the Parthian dynasty was Arsaces, a warlord and tribal leader in the area east of the Caspian Sea. Arsaces, whose successors called themselves “Arsacids,” had rebelled, around 250 BC, against a likewise secessionist satrap of the Seleucids, laying the foundation for an expansion, which only came to a halt on the Euphrates in the west and on the Indus in the east.¹⁹ The Parthian Empire rose to the standing of a superpower under its king Mithradates I (c. 165–132 BC), who pushed his way into Babylonia and repulsed the counteroffensive of a coalition led by the Seleucid king Demetrios II (140 BC). Mithradates took Demetrios prisoner and occupied Babylonia. In defeating Antiochos VII (129 BC), who in the meantime had reconquered all of Mesopotamia, Mithradates’ son Phraates II could consolidate the Parthian conquests and even take a leap to Syria, before steppe nomads entering the Parthian Empire from the north put an end to operations in the west. Nevertheless, the territorial situation in Mesopotamia remained unclear for several decades; the intensity of governance was low, whoever was in charge.²⁰

Culturally, the Parthians followed a middle path between continuity and break. The Parthian kings saw themselves definitely as heirs to the Seleucids and ultimately to Alexander the Great. They minted coins, which were linked to the pictorial patterns of the Hellenistic coinage, though as time went by, they became always more distant, left the traditional system of mass and weight untouched, made Greek, besides their own language, the imperial *lingua franca*, and left the Greco-Macedonian elites in office in the poleis they conquered. At the same time,

the memory of traditions brought by the Parthians from their Iranian homeland, was still alive. The Achaemenids and their Empire, which had been annihilated by Alexander, were very present in people's historical memory. The Arsacids took this up, increasingly explicitly over time. Their poets sang of the heroic deeds of imaginary Iranian ancestors, the kings' coins conspicuously bore Parthian, instead of Greek, legends of the importance of the Zoroastrian fire cult grew, and the pictorial imagery edged away from Hellenistic ideals, which is visible in the increasingly abstract portraits of the Arsacid kings on their coins.²¹

The symbolic inventory in the Parthian Empire – aesthetics, language, rituals, narratives – remained, as far as we can see, Hellenistic, though obtaining at the same time a specifically local colour. This process can be very well observed in a provincial town such as Dura-Europos. The town on the middle Euphrates was subject to increasing Parthian influence at least from 129 BC. When exactly the Arsacid kings gained supreme authority over the city – whether, as is often claimed, in 113 BC, or somewhat later – is of little importance.²² Certain is the fact that Parthian influence on local politics and culture gradually intensified. The Greco-Macedonian elites, as can be seen from the names of magistrates in inscriptions, seem to have been still in charge. The city apparently retained the institutional character of a polis too. The Seleucid Era remained in use for dating all documents. All that was built, however, underwent a radical change. The orthogonal road grid of Hippodamian imprint disappeared underneath a new layout by about 50 BC. The rectangular blocks with uniform houses gave way to smaller, more irregular buildings. Public space gave way to private homes. In a prominent position, on the so-called citadel, a palace-like structure was erected, featuring three open-fronted halls, which were covered with barrel vaults. Such “Iwans” arose in other centres of the Parthian Empire too – in Assur, Ktesiphon and Hatra – marking a departure from Hellenistic building traditions as well as an orientation towards presumably local architectural design principles.²³

A similar development can be witnessed, somewhat offset in time, in sacred architecture. A real construction boom led to the rise of a series of tall, though modest, temples, whose layout with a central court had not the slightest thing in common with Greco-Hellenistic temples. Their architectural features – “Knickachse,” “Breitraum” layout, high places on accessible roofs – seem to go back to sacred traditions reaching as far back as the early urban period in Mesopotamia.²⁴ The interior of the temples with wall paintings, as well as circular and relief sculptures, does not point to the West, but to the Parthian East too. Characteristic of the representation scheme, beginning with the first century BC, is frontality and stylization of the representation; the emphasis is not on individual characteristics and human action, but on the social significance and function of what is depicted. This form language is known as “Parthian art,” which is in fact misleading. Here we have to deal with a visual repertoire that transcends political boundaries, and which spread in Mesopotamia and in much of Syria. Continuing Hellenistic as well as pre-Hellenistic traditions, “Parthian art” was a hybrid artistic language, which gave expression to the region's character, as well as, in spite of all the differences in detail, to a world-view shared by a large community.

“Parthian art” is indeed no reflection of cultural standardization prompted by the Parthian Empire. It is, rather, emblematic of a certain regional identity taking shape in the area between the Mediterranean and the Tigris.²⁵

That this was possible, was due to the character of the new frontier on the Euphrates. This steppe frontier was not a line of demarcation with hermetically sealed spaces, but permeable, mobile, and blurred. Following the logic of imperial rule, it was not a line, but a broad seam, a contact zone in which competing claims for power of very low intensity were opposed to one another and even in part crossed each other. Accordingly, there was a great deal of room for movement among local players, who enjoyed extensive autonomy along the steppe border and were, in times of tension, able to play the great empires off against each other. Even if measured by the standards of large tributary empires, the intensity of Parthian governance was weak in the periphery, while the core zone of direct rule in the Near East was relatively small. All in all, direct rule was limited to Babylonia, while a large triangle between the western bend of the Euphrates, the Caucasus and Zagros, was spread with local dynasties, which had remained in power: states and territories, which partly had the status of kingdoms, partly of principalities, whose rulers descended from indigenous ruler families, and who, regarding their relationship to the Arsacids, would rather insist on their autonomy. In this, the Parthian Empire did not differ significantly from its predecessor, the Seleucid Empire.²⁶

With good reason did the Parthian Great King style himself with the ancient Iranian title “King of Kings.” He was indeed a king to whom many rulers were subject. Nevertheless, he took care not to micro-manage the provincial princes. Because direct rule lay beyond his possibilities, he was generous in granting autonomy. The degree of autonomy, as well as the status of the dynasts, was, however, the subject of constant negotiation between headquarters and periphery. The perceptions could be quite different: at times, dynasts in Ktesiphon were listed as “satraps,” but they regarded themselves as princes or kings. Local rulers continually tested to the limit their space for free play and the ties to the Great King resident in Ktesiphon. In moments of Arsacid weakness, they did not hesitate to quit their subordination to the King of Kings, and then to pursue their own policy as sovereign rulers, or otherwise subordinate themselves to another empire (which was soon to be Rome). Sooner or later, most of the local rulers along the steppe frontier were confronted with this decision: the kings of Osroene in Edessa in the bend of the Euphrates, as well as those of Adiabene, Media Atropatene and Armenia; the rulers of the desert city of Hatra in the Jazīra, like the descendants of the Macedonian settlers, who had their say in Dura-Europos.²⁷

Its specific political dynamism made the steppe frontier a *sui-generis* biotope. It imposed upon the local as well as the imperial players its very own logic, demanding, especially from the smaller rulers, a great deal of survival skills. Particularly when the balance of power was volatile – which repeatedly occurred from 53 BC onward – they were well-advised to leave no doubt as to their steadfast loyalty. This could often only be accomplished by playing a double game. By backing the wrong horse, a local ruler could quickly, if it became known, find himself out of political

power, which usually amounted to a death sentence. In spite of all risks, however, the constellation of the steppe frontier had substantial advantages for all the parties involved. It obliged the players, whether large or small, to mutual consideration and demanded from them a healthy dose of pragmatism. The dependence and loyalty relations, which were always deliberately kept vague, allowed resourceful border crossers to pursue their activities – especially business ones – without taking much political consideration for either side of the political watershed, which could never be pinpointed quite exactly. To what effect this took place, and with what, sometimes paradoxical, consequences, will be seen further.

Pompey and the consequences

Shared traditions remained alive, even after the Seleucid kings were gone and the eagles of Rome's legions towered over the Levant. Rome was the second power to take the legacy of the Seleucids in the Near East, and to follow the Parthians in the footsteps of political Hellenism. In 188 BC, with the peace-treaty of Apameia, which Antiochos III Megas, was forced to sign after his defeat at Magnesia, the Romans had obtained the entrance ticket into the theatre of big politics in the Near East. Henceforth, they became a power factor not to be ignored by any state in the eastern Mediterranean. This was felt by the rulers of the region one after the other. The most obvious message was received by the Seleucid king Antiochos IV Epiphanes, when he was on the point of conquering the moribund Ptolemaic Empire. Near Eleusis, the Roman envoy Popillius Laenas confronted him, demanding, in the name of the Roman Republic, the withdrawal of the Seleucid army from Egypt. Then he took a stick, drew a circle around the bewildered king, and declared that Antiochos had to decide before he came out of the circle. The ruler over the Near East gave way and ordered retreat. The day of Eleusis (168 BC) marks the watershed between the era of Alexander and that of Augustus. Although no Roman legionary was stationed beyond the straits of the Hellespont and the Bosphorus, the Romans had demoted the Hellenistic rulers as recipients of orders.²⁸

The wider region between the Black Sea and the Nile was subjugated by the Romans in three stages, the intensity of governance increasing markedly with each one of them. In the first phase, the *res publica* was limited to the role of arbitrator. Its power was based on the ability to successfully threaten, punish and reward. The efficacy of this power manifested itself at Eleusis. A political heavyweight like the Seleucid King had no doubt that threats would be followed by actions. Here Rome's authority was beyond doubt. But there were shadows too. Already in Greece, where the Romans behaved similarly, it had been shown that the small and smallest players in particular only reluctantly submitted to the will of the rulers on the Tiber. They persistently pursued their own political objectives, thus challenging the hegemon. Rome, therefore, initiated a radical change of strategy, imposing on Greece from then on a direct rule instead of an indirect one. In 146 BC, as the new province of Achaea, Hellas became part of the Roman Empire.²⁹

It was by chance that the west of Asia Minor followed this example. In 133 BC, King Attalos III died in Pergamon. Having seen no future for the kingdom of

Pergamon, he bequeathed his state to the Romans, who established the first Roman province on the Asian continent. Asia became a model for Rome's further expansion on the continent: the province became a switching centre, from where the Roman governor controlled an array of autonomous client monarchies. By flexibly grading the intensity of their governance and by restricting their direct rule to relatively small areas, the Romans reduced the costs of imposing their hegemonic policy to a tolerable minimum. They were able to shift the main financial, military, and non-material load to client-monarchs, whose loyalty was guaranteed by treaties, sacred oaths, and not infrequently by taking hostages.³⁰

But the patchwork carpet of client monarchies in Asia Minor became a powder keg, the explosion of which could not be averted with the minimal expenditure invested by Rome. In the second century BC, in northern and eastern Asia Minor, various small kingdoms had crumbled away from the Seleucid Empire, whose monarchs all saw themselves as followers of Alexander the Great. The Kingdoms of Bithynia in the north-west and Cappadocia in the south, as well as Galatia in the centre were under Roman influence. In the Kingdom of Armenia, which had constituted itself in the east in 189 BC, it was partly the Parthians who gave the political tone, and the kings partly followed their own political agenda. Two small kingdoms in the southern highlands, Commagene and Sophene, which had also broken away from the Seleucids in the second century BC, steered with great diplomatic skill between the great powers. The most important truly sovereign power factor in the region was the kingdom of Pontos, in which, in 120 BC, Mithradates VI Eupator came to power, a monarch who felt himself called upon to accomplish great deeds. Coins show the idealized portrait of a youthful king with wavy hair. Just like Alexander.³¹

Mithradates first expanded to the north of the Black Sea. The Romans only perceived him as a threat when he turned to his neighbouring countries in Asia Minor. With Rome's protege Nikomedes III of Bithynia, he rivalled for hegemony over Galatia, Paphlagonia, and Cappadocia, only to lose out after the Romans repeatedly intervened in favour of Nikomedes. His successor, Nikomedes IV, declared war on Mithradates in 89 BC. Behind this were the Romans, whose two legions, stationed in Asia Minor, marched side by side with the Bithynians towards Pontos. Mithradates' combat-proven army did not flinch in the face of the allies, who suffered a crushing defeat. The province of Asia could no longer be defended. In 88 BC, Mithradates staged a night of long knives, in which the anti-Roman resentments of Asia Minor's population found vent. 80,000 Italics are said to have fallen victim to the so-called Ephesian Vespers. It was the beginning of three long, wrecking wars between Rome and Pontos, in which Rome's legions repeatedly tried, in vain, to overcome Mithradates.³²

There, where Sulla and Lucullus failed, another great man of the Roman-Republican period succeeded: Pompey, who, in unambiguous allusion to Alexander the Great, called himself Magnus. In 66 BC, the forty-year-old was given by law the supreme command against Mithradates. He pursued the ageing King deep into the Anatolian highlands and broke his alliance with his son-in-law Tiridates of Armenia. Mithradates, who was able to flee to Crimea, fell victim to

a murder by his own son. Pompey had scored a total victory. At the feet of a man who, according to Roman custom, did not even hold office, now lay the ruins of the Near East's "international" system, which had been shattered by more than twenty years of war. The principle of indirect rule in Asia Minor had proved incapable of containing a force like that of Mithradates. Tigranes' II kingdom of Armenia was finished as a regional power, the Seleucid Empire was so completely shattered, that a new order had to be urgently imposed in order to fill in the power vacuum. Pompey established two new provinces – Bithynia et Pontus in Asia Minor, and Syria in the Levant – and reorganized the cordon sanitaire of the client states in advance (Figure 4.1).³³

The province of Syria comprised the urban nuclei of the Tetrapolis and Phoenicia, as parts of the former Seleucid Empire, which Pompey dissolved for good. Rome now had a directly ruled bridgehead in the Levant. From here, the governor controlled the client rulers in the immediate vicinity of the province: the kings of Commagene, the lords of Emesa and the princes of such dwarf territories as Chalcis or Ituraea in Lebanon. The greatest troublemaker among the autonomous states of the region was Judea, with the temple city of Jerusalem and the high priests at the top. It was here that Pompey received a taste of what was in store for the Romans in their relationship with the Jews, when in 65 BC he was drawn into the civil war between Iohannes Hyrkanos and Aristobulos,

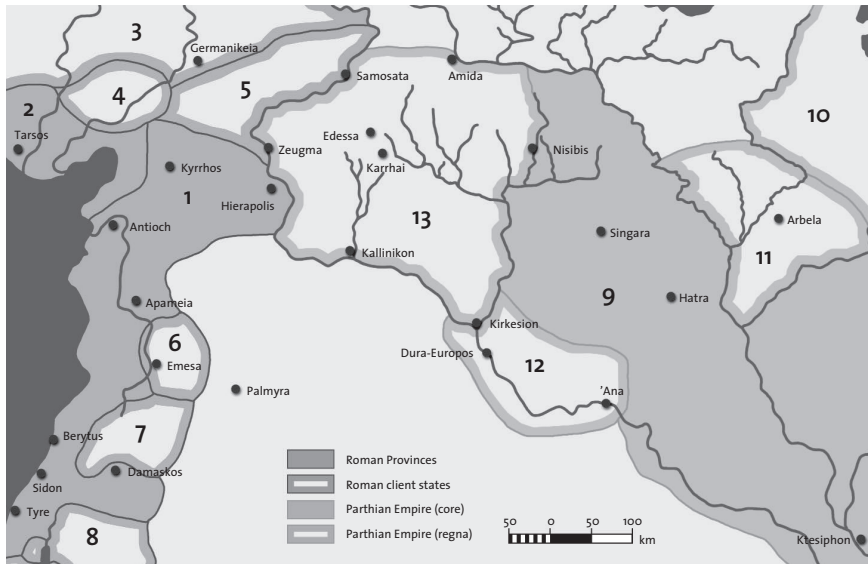


Figure 4.1 Syria and Mesopotamia, 63 BC. Roman province of Syria (1), Kingdom of Cilicia (2), Kingdom of Cappadocia (3), Hierapolis Kastabala (4), Kingdom of Kommagene (5), Emesa (6), Tetrarchy of the Ituraeans (7), Kingdom of the Hasmonaeans (8), Parthian Empire (9), Kingdom of Media Atropatene (10), Kingdom of Adiabene (11), Mesopotamia-Parapotamia (12), Kingdom of Osrhoene (13)

the hostile brothers who were descended from the ruling Hasmonean dynasty. At the end, Pompey had to besiege the Temple Mount for three full months. After victoriously taking the sanctuary, Pompey committed a sacrilege, which from the perspective of the Jews was worthy to bring damnation: he entered the “holy” of the temple reserved for the high priest. “Heathen strangers,” the psalmist calls indignantly, “climbed to your [God’s] altar; they trampled full of arrogance with their sandals on it.”³⁴ And further, “Do not hesitate, O God, to bring retribution to their head, to transform the arrogance of the [Roman] dragon into disgrace.”³⁵ The foundation stone to a relationship of mutual misunderstanding and distrust was laid.³⁶

How the relationship between the new Roman province and Palmyra evolved under these circumstances, cannot be clarified due to the absence of evidence. The closest description of the area we can get is delivered by the geographer Strabo, who wrote shortly before the beginning of the Common Era, portraying the Levant from his own perspective. Strabo’s description focuses on the Levantine cities during Caesar’s dictatorship, at the time when Caecilius Bassus, a former follower of Pompey, instigated a revolt against Caesar in Syria, making Apameia his headquarters (46–44 BC). Starting with Apameia, also known as Pella, the tetrapolis town on the middle Orontes, the description continues with the immediate surrounding area. Of all the mentioned locations, Larisa, Kasiana, Megara and Apollonia, only Larisa (Larissa-Sizara) has been identified as lying near the road following the Orontes towards Emesa, about 20 kilometres south-east of Apameia.³⁷ Strabo continues, mentioning “guarded places” which were in the hands of “neighbouring tribal chieftains,”³⁸ like Lysias, Arethusa, Helioupolis (Heliopolis), and Chalcis. Arethusa is situated on the Orontes still further upriver from Larissa-Sizara, not far from today’s Homs, Heliopolis (Baalbek) and Chalcis (ad Libanum) in the Beqaa Valley. Strabo reports that Arethusa lies in the tribal territory of the Emeseni, though notably he does not mention their later centre Emesa (Homs).³⁹ The report refers to the Beqaa Valley as Massyas; it was in the hands of a certain Ptolemaios, son of Mennaioi, and was the country of the Ituraeans.⁴⁰ Here we come across two tribes and one tribal chief, a *phylarchos*, who himself has a Macedonian name, whose father, however, still bears a name of unmistakably Aramaic origin.⁴¹ Finally, Strabo mentions a third tribe, the Rhambaioi, who lived as nomads on the right bank of the Euphrates, and whose king Alchaidamnos plied back and forth between Syria and Mesopotamia before joining Bassus as a mercenary.⁴² Strabo clearly defines Apameia’s urban territory as against the area inhabited by tribes. But even this area is not uniform. While we hear a lot about rulers and – presumably – permanent settlements in the Beqaa and Orontes valleys, where the Emeseni and Ituraeans lived, for the steppe tribe of the Rhambaioi, only the king (*basileus*) is mentioned.

In the following chapter, Strabo summarizes this information once more: the above-mentioned area bordered, in the east, on “Parapotamia,” as “the land of the Arab *phylarchoi*” was called; on “Chalcidice,” probably the territory around Chalcis in the Beqaa Valley; and finally on “the whole area south of the Apameians, which for the most part belongs to the tent-dwellers.”⁴³ The geographic location of

these territories is not very clear, the “southern area,” however, must refer to the vast desert stretching from the Palmyra Ranges to the south, probably including Palmyra itself, although its name is not mentioned. The report tells of tent-dwellers living in the area, who were very similar to the nomads in Mesopotamia. Very interesting is Strabo’s final remark: the closer these groups lived to the “Syrians,” the more “civilized”⁴⁴ they were. Less civilized, on the other hand, were the “Arabs and tent-dwellers.”⁴⁵ While the settled tribes close to the “Syrians” knew political institutions, were “better organized”⁴⁶ and had chieftains (*phylarchoi*), this was not the case for the “Arabs and tent-dwellers.”

Here Strabo draws the picture of a civilization gap, which corresponded to the geographic context: Apameia with its related towns and villages represented, as it were, the outpost of the urban world of the “Syrians.” “Syrian” is the term used by Strabo for the Seleucids. So what is meant here, are mainly the Greek-speaking inhabitants of the Tetrapolis. Being Greek was, in the geographer’s world view, equal to being civilized, and the Tetrapolis was without doubt the stronghold of Greek culture in Syria. The antithesis of the civilized “Syrians” who lived in cities, was made in Strabo’s narrative by the steppe nomads, the Rhambaiioi and the “Arabs and tent-dwellers” of the area south of Apameia. These are totally uncivilized, barbarians – the word is not explicitly mentioned. Between these extremes are the tribes belonging to the Beqaa and Orontes valleys, as well as to the adjoining mountains of Lebanon and Antilebanon. They have rudimentary political institutions, *phylarchoi*, and permanent settlements. If this reconstruction is correct, then Palmyra, which is not mentioned by Strabo, must have been right in the middle of the area inhabited by the barbarian tribes. For Strabo, it literally lay in the middle of nowhere, in a reality that was fundamentally different from that of the civilized Oikumene. The fact that even the knowledgeable geographer did not know about the settlement in the oasis of Tadmur speaks volumes: although Palmyra undoubtedly existed, it did not yet play any role in the Roman perspective. Its entry in history was still to come.

Interlude: Antony in Palmyra

Palmyra’s first appearance, at least on the historiographic stage, was made a decade after the events described by Strabo on the account of Caecilius Bassus. Meanwhile Caesar had been murdered, and the Roman Empire had been divided between the triumvirs Octavian and Mark Antony. The East was ruled by Antony, who had set up residence in Alexandria, the capital of what was still Ptolemaic Egypt. Famous is his liaison with the Egyptian queen Cleopatra (Figure 4.2) who was blamed by posterity for being responsible for Antony’s forthcoming debacle.

Rome’s relationship with the Parthians, which initially, even if not friendly, at least had been peaceful, had worsened considerably during this period. From partners, who had, even during the time of Sulla and Pompey, trustingly endeavoured to reach a stable order in the Near East, they had become fierce enemies. It had all started with Marcus Licinius Crassus, who had forged, in 59 BC, the so-called First Triumvirate with Pompey and Caesar, and hatched the ambition of equalling

them in the glory of war. The Parthian Empire – which, in 54 BC found itself in the midst of a bloody civil war, therefore seeming to offer an easy, as well as rewarding expansion target – had become the object of his ambitious plans. Crassus, who had fancied himself to be the new Alexander, lay dead in the spring of 53 BC on the desert sand near the Osroenian town of Carrhai. With him, some 30,000 Roman soldiers had fallen, the standards of several legions lost. Crassus had committed the deadly mistake of underestimating the enemy's cavalry.

With the disgraceful defeat of the Romans at Carrhai, a traditional hostility was established, which more than anything else would shape the history of the Near East in the following 250 years. Everyone in Rome cried out for revenge, especially because of the humiliating loss of the standards. The Parthians on their side, quite understandably, saw no reason to give the Romans the benefit of the doubt. During their centuries-long Cold War, Rome and the Parthian Empire found themselves time and again in a relatively peaceful coexistence with each other. In general, however, mistrust, resentments and annexation attempts prevailed, which repeatedly discharged themselves in hot conflicts.⁴⁷

The slogan "Revenge for Carrhai" had already been issued by the dictator Caesar, who in the winter of 43/44 BC followed suit with preparations for a large Parthian campaign. His assassination on the Ides of March however put a premature end to his undertaking.⁴⁸ As Caesar's heir in the East, Antony was now responsible for its frontier. Here, after Caesar's assassination, the Parthians had put their own weapons to use. In 40 BC, they had invaded the province of Syria, killing the governor Lucius Decidius Saxa, and instead of the pro-Roman high priest Hyrkanos II, who had been supported by Pompey against his brother in 63 BC, installing in Judea his nephew Antigonus, a passionate loather of all things Roman. The circumstances for Antony were not the better by the fact that the supreme commander of the Parthian side was Quintus Labienus, son of renegade Caesarian officer Titus Labienus. Quintus had joined Caesar's murderers Brutus and Cassius, and after their defeat near Philippi (42 BC), had defected to the Parthians. He led his motley army, made up of Parthian units and rebel Roman legions, as far as Asia Minor, where he was finally defeated by Antony's general Publius Ventidius Bassus (39 BC).⁴⁹ Antony himself re-conquered Syria (38 BC), while Hyrkanos' son-in-law Herod succeeded in wresting Judea from Antigonus (37 BC), for which Antony soon after awarded him with the royal diadem.⁵⁰

In spite of these achievements, the Parthian question was still in abeyance. The threatening situation had only slightly relaxed, and above all the revenge for Carrhai was still an unredeemed promise. Visibly under pressure on the domestic front, Antony was in desperate need of success. Moreover, the death of the Parthian king Orodes II (37 BC) had once again triggered power struggles in the eastern empire. The moment seemed favourable. In the spring of 36 BC, Antony mustered his army, consisting of ten legions, at the town of Zeugma on the Euphrates. But instead of marching downriver towards the Parthian heartland around Ktesiphon, as the Parthians expected, the army moved upriver. As soon as he reached Armenia, Antony forged an alliance with its King Artavasdes II, whereupon the allied partners invaded Media Atropatene, a tributary kingdom of

the Parthians, with an army of, allegedly, 100,000 men. If Antony's campaign up to that point had proceeded exactly according to plan, from now on, all that could go wrong, went wrong. The situation got quickly out of hand, and the Roman army ran into an ambush, in which the siege machines were destroyed. Though under constant attack from the cavalry, the Romans finally gained a victory in pitched battle, but were unable to use their success to strategic advantage. The siege of the Median capital Phraaspa failed too, so that Antony had to beat a retreat without having achieved the desired result. In a bold *renversement des alliances*, the Median king, who, in order to make the confusion complete, was also called Artavasdes, offered Antony an alliance, which the latter used as a redress to his former coalition partner, the Armenian Artavasdes, whom he blamed for his failure. In the end, though sustaining horrendous casualties, Antony came back to Alexandria bringing with him a rich booty and a prisoner, who was introduced as the success of his mission. Except for the unhappy Armenian, the war had ended without tangible results for all parties. If there was anything to be learnt from the debacle, it was that in the diplomatic jungle of the steppe frontier, alliances always entailed a use-by date.⁵¹

Palmyra does not appear in any account of the war, but it is the scene of an episode, reported by Appian, the historiographer from Alexandria who wrote in the second century AD. Indeed, Appian's account is not the earliest ancient text in which Palmyra appears, but the earliest mention with reference to the period of the action. It is therefore worthwhile reading the text as a whole:⁵²

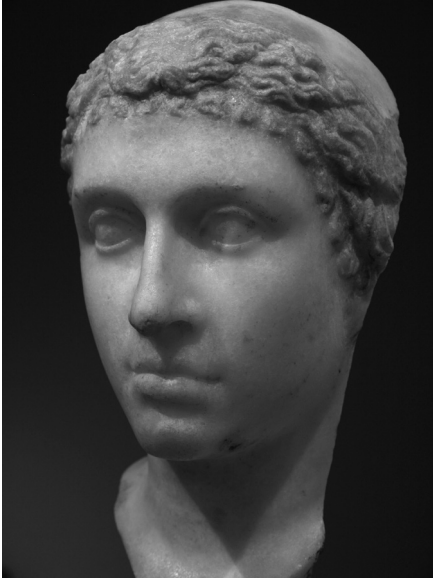


Figure 4.2 Portrait of Cleopatra VII, 40–30 BC. Cleopatra was not only Mark Antony's companion, but also his political partner, whose Egyptian kingdom played a pivotal role in his dynastic ambitions. Berlin, Antikensammlung

When Cleopatra returned home Antony sent a cavalry force to Palmyra, situated not far from the Euphrates, to plunder it, bringing the trifling accusation against its inhabitants, that being on the frontier between the Romans and the Parthians, they had avoided taking sides between them; for, being merchants, they bring the products of India and Arabia from Persia and dispose of them in the Roman territory; but in fact, Antony's intention was to enrich his horsemen. However, the Palmyrenes were forewarned and they transported their property across the river, and, stationing themselves on the bank, prepared to shoot anybody who should attack them, for they are expert bowmen. The cavalry found nothing in the polis. They turned round and came back, having met no foe, and empty-handed.

Appian brings this episode into direct relation with the outbreak of the Parthian war unleashed by Antony. Not only the Palmyrenes, but several rulers of Syria had fled from Antony to Parthian territory, where, bent on revenge as they were, they made the Parthians become total enemies of the Romans. The text contains several pieces of information about Palmyra, which are very welcome, since they seem to complete our fragmentary image of the city in the first century BC. First, we learn that Palmyra was "on the frontier" between Rome and the Parthian Empire, so probably it did not belong to either empire. Second, Palmyra is explicitly labelled a "polis": it was therefore at least a city-like settlement with far-reaching political autonomy. Third, this "polis" Palmyra must have been wealthy enough to make an attractive foray target for the Roman cavalry. Fourth, the Palmyrene possessions, however, were evidently so mobile that they could quickly flee with bag and baggage across the Euphrates to secure their property from Antony. Fifth, we learn something about the defence potential and weaponry of the Palmyrenes. They were excellent archers, and if need had been, they would have been capable of meeting Antony's horsemen at the Euphrates with a hail of arrows.

The plausibility and inner logic of this narrative have already been questioned, with good reason.⁵³ In fact, one wonders how the Palmyrenes could evacuate so thoroughly such a significant and wealthy city within a possibly short warning time. Why did they have to flee head over heels, if they were militarily so strong as to believe themselves well-prepared for a defensive battle on the Euphrates? In view of the serious inconsistencies in the text, it seems plausible that its author only intended to denounce Antony. In fact, he cuts an utterly poor figure in the report. With his insatiable greed for looting, he sows hatred against Rome, which erupts into the next war. Thanks to Cassius Dio and Plutarch, however, we know better. The war had been preceded by the Parthians' attack on Syria and Asia Minor. With his war, Antony settled a score and not vice versa.

Here the question arises as to what period in Palmyra's history is Appian referring in his report. Does the description really fit in the first century BC? Certainly, Palmyra being a frontier city could make sense, though even this information is inaccurate, and so is the statement that Palmyra is "not far from the Euphrates." The classification of Palmyra as a "polis" is to be considered. This was possibly the case in Appian's own lifetime, the second century AD. But what about the

time of the second Triumvirate? In this chronological context, the term “polis” is probably as misplaced as the wealth, which according to Appian, had been gained by the Palmyrenes in their trade with India, Persia, and Arabia. Here, too, it seems that this material is concerned with the Palmyra of the imperial period, and not that of the first century BC. After all, the Palmyrenes were famous in Appian’s own time for their mounted archers, who were deployed by the Roman army on all sorts of battlefields. Conclusion: on closer inspection, Appian’s Palmyra episode turns out to be a single anachronism, from which little to nothing can be learnt about pre-imperial Palmyra.

More important is the fact that for Strabo, Palmyra is not even worth a footnote.⁵⁴ Though well acquainted with the region, everything lying south of Apameia was enveloped in blurry clouds for the geographer. There he vaguely took notice of “Arabs and tent-dwellers,” who, standing on different levels of barbarism, inhabited the mountains and deserts. His report, however, thoroughly lacks clear contours. If Antony’s cavalry had really undertaken an attack on the oasis city, would not then Strabo, who wrote a few decades later, be familiar with its name? Especially if Palmyra already played an important role in the long-distance trade, as Appian claims, this blind spot in the eyes of the geographer would have been utterly inexplicable. The only logical conclusion is that Antony never was in Palmyra. There would not have been much to gain for him there anyway.

Becoming a city

The oasis was by now, however, in the grip of a dynamism which was about to radically change Palmyra within a few decades. The first key period of this transformation, constituting the real great watershed in Palmyra’s history, seems to be the time around the beginning of the first century AD, especially the early years of Tiberius’ reign. The monumental design of the court house from trench II⁵⁵ and the construction of the main street near trench I,⁵⁶ both in the Hellenistic city, are dated as early as the Augustan period. The earliest inscription in the Temple of Bēl (AD 17 or 19), which testifies that the sanctuary was under construction and that Palmyrene traders resident in the Parthian city of Seleukeia had made a substantial financial contribution to its erection, can be dated to the early years of Tiberius’ rule;⁵⁷ exactly at the same time and at the instigation of the Syrian legate, Palmyra’s western border with the city of Emesa was marked with boundary stones (AD 17 at the latest);⁵⁸ the visit of Germanicus in his capacity as proconsul and holder of an *imperium maius* for the East in Palmyra took place around AD 18⁵⁹ (he took advantage of this to influence the Palmyrene tax tariff⁶⁰); and finally, a Latin inscription informs that the legatus of the *legio X Fretensis* had erected honorific statues in Palmyra for three members of the imperial family – Tiberius, Drusus and Germanicus.⁶¹

This concentration of highly significant evidence for Palmyra within the space of only few years cannot be simply due to chance. Apparently, the oasis experienced a downright building boom during the Augusto-Tiberian period.

The Palmyrenes invested not only in public space (the street in the Hellenistic city and Temple of Bēl), they erected private houses of impressive dimensions (the court house in the Hellenistic city) as well. At the same time, Rome's presence became, all of a sudden, more than evident. With Germanicus (Figure 4.3), one of the highest-ranking representatives of the dynasty paid an official visit to the oasis. This could only be possible if Palmyra at this time was not merely of economic, but also of political, significance. Provided with the instructions (*mandata*) of the *princeps*, Tiberius' nephew and adoptive son "had been sent as proconsul to the overseas provinces of Asia with the task of supervising them and the kingdoms of this region."⁶² This is reported in the Tabula Siarensis, a document issued by the Senate to Germanicus' honour after his early death in the Near East. In AD 17, Germanicus visited Armenia and spent the following



Figure 4.3 Bust of Germanicus, green basalt, c. 15–20 AD. The cross on the forehead has been added in the late classical period. London, British Museum

year in Syria, where he received kings and envoys, among others an ambassador of the Parthian king, who invited him to meet his monarch, Artabanos. In Cyrrhus, he also met Gnaeus Calpurnius Piso, the governor. The relationship between the two men was as bad as it could be. Germanicus expelled Piso, who had started a fight with him on several occasions, from the province. The governor was therefore suspected of being complicit in Germanicus' sudden death in AD 19. Outrage rose high especially when Piso, after the death of Tiberius' nephew, tried to regain control of Syria in alliances with local kings and Roman deserters. The ousted governor eluded his certain death sentence a little later by committing suicide.⁶³

Germanicus' visit reveals the importance attributed, by Tiberius, to the Near East. Syria and the surrounding client states were too important to let a man like Piso, who was not free from ambitions, to do what he wanted. Germanicus' personal visit to Palmyra emphasises how important the oasis-city had become in the meantime. During his visit, Germanicus essentially limited himself to the territory of the Roman province. Of the dependent monarchies, he visited only Armenia, which had by now reached top priority.⁶⁴ So why visit Palmyra?

In the face of the apparently sudden abundance of evidence from the oasis of Tadmur, further questions arise: was Palmyra's swift rise to prominence preceded by a longer process of demographic and economic growth, which, for us at least, took place largely unnoticed? Or did the city in the Augustan era suddenly experience a meteoric rise out of nothing? Where did the people who settled in the oasis come from? Furthermore: what role did Rome play in this equation with several unknowns? And finally, which form did the balance of power between the empires of Rome and Parthia acquire in a region that for a long time seems to have lain in the blind spot of big politics? What was the importance of the intercontinental long-distance trade? Which was the effect of the demise of the Ptolemaic Empire, which had constituted the bottleneck of India's trade until 30 BC?

If one looks for answers, it is difficult to find them in the evidence alone. There are no textual sources which could illuminate Palmyra's development before AD 17. Even the archaeological findings, incomplete as they are, provide little help. We know that, by the third century BC, people lived in the oasis. We know that there was a settlement in the first century BC, which had a sanctuary in the place of the later Temple of Bēl. We also know that by the Augustan period, this settlement had adopted an urban character, with paved streets and large houses, indicating the presence of an urban elite with a corresponding degree of social differentiation. And finally, thanks to archaeological finds, we know that the city was connected with other parts of the world – with Mesopotamia and various centres of the Mediterranean. That much, no more and no less, can be inferred as assured knowledge from the evidence. Archaeological research in the Hellenistic city has greatly expanded our knowledge of Palmyra. The archaeologists' view, according to which finds in the Hellenistic court house testify to "the great economic and cultural wealth of the inhabitants, which can be understood in the context of

Palmyra's worldwide trade,"⁶⁵ applies unrestrictedly from the Augustan period onwards. It does not apply, however, to the time preceding it.

From the evidence at hand, two scenarios may be thought of about the way Palmyra became a city. One possibility is that following a more or less continuous growth, the settlement of the early Hellenistic period slowly evolved into a city, which finally achieved such economic, political and strategic importance that Germanicus considered it worthy of his visit. This process would have been largely independent of Rome and its expansion in the Near East. The oasis would have attracted people in the main because it was conveniently located along one of the central routes between the Mediterranean Sea and the Persian Gulf. In this scenario, its rise was due to the fact that the commercial artery leading through Palmyra had overtaken other, alternative long-distance trade routes: on a regional scale the trade channel described by Strabo across northern Syria, Zeugma and the river Euphrates⁶⁶ and, trans-regionally, mainly the Red Sea route across Egypt. The shift may have occurred in small steps. Its event would be enough to explain Palmyra's gradual rise to a primary hub of long-distance trade.

In spite of their fragmentary evidence, the excavation findings of the Hellenistic city speak in favour of this version. They corroborate the assumption that Palmyra was in contact with other regions, particularly Mesopotamia, as early as the third century BC. The contacts increased in distance and intensity, apparently keeping pace with the growth of the settlement. In spite of all the questions, which still remain open, the data obtained in the Hellenistic city match with such a scenario. Under these auspices, Palmyra would have increasingly evolved into a magnet for people who sought to secure their livelihood, and beyond that, considerable prosperity, with long-distance trade. These people may very well have come from Palmyra's immediate neighbourhood, like nomads and peasants, who tended their gardens in the oasis' hinterland. Others, running the itinerary as travelling traders, may have come from remoter areas and at some point may have settled down in Palmyra.

There is, however, a serious consideration speaking as *argumentum ex silentio* against this scenario: if it took centuries for Palmyra to evolve into the city it was in the Augusto-Tiberian period, then why did Strabo ignore its existence? Certainly, the geographer's information may have been obsolete by the time he wrote his work. It reflects, at least, the perspective of the 40s of the first century BC, which is the background of the Bassus episode related by him. A significant city of its size, of its economic and strategic importance, which could have been on a par with other centres in the region, such as Zeugma, could hardly have escaped the attention of the author.

Therefore, a second scenario should not be hastily rejected. After a long period of stagnation and relative insignificance, in the Augustan period Palmyra may have developed suddenly into a centre of prime importance and notably into a cornerstone in the political architecture of the Roman Near East. In this model, Palmyra's growth would not have run linearly, but rather in steps. As shown above, the archaeological evidence of the Hellenistic city reveals a significant

increase of imports from Mesopotamia from about 150 BC.⁶⁷ The findings seem surprising at first sight; exactly at this time Mesopotamia was caught up in the maelstrom of Parthian expansion. After long fights, Mesopotamia's final separation from the Seleucid Empire took place in 129 BC.

A similar pattern appears again in the first century BC, when Crassus and Antony fought against the Parthians, turning the Syro-Mesopotamian frontier territory on both sides of the Euphrates into a conflict zone. Though bringing no change to the territorial status quo, Crassus' and Antony's campaigns blatantly worsened the relationship between the two empires. Good neighbourly relations turned into the antagonism of arch enemies, who did not trust each other in the least. Once beyond the Euphrates, a subject of the Roman emperor was *persona non grata*, and vice versa. The implications for the long-distance trade were unmistakable: merchants from the province of Syria heading towards the Persian Gulf via Zeugma and the Euphrates route, were virtually barred from using this passage. For the second time within a century, one of the major trade routes between East and West was practically blocked.

Blocked? This is where Palmyra comes into play. Although the oasis had excellent contacts with the West, its inhabitants were no subjects of the Roman emperor. The city lay, at least for a time, beyond the jurisdiction of Syria's governor. In the smouldering conflict between the two empires, the Palmyrenes had wisely decided to maintain equidistance, remaining neutral. Pliny the Elder refers to the shrewd steering between Parthians and Romans, when he writes that Palmyra has "its very own destiny" (*privata sorte*), and lies "between the great empires of the Romans and the Parthians" (*inter duo imperia summa Romanorum et Parthorum*).⁶⁸ Though written as late as AD 70, this comment fits well into the time shortly after the beginning of the Common Era, when Palmyra lay far beyond the Roman borders.

This circumstance granted the city an extremely comfortable position: the Palmyrenes were the only people who could mediate between the Parthians and the Romans, and move freely between the Mediterranean and the Persian Gulf. Along one of the most important trading routes of the ancient world, they made sure that the gate to the East did not lock. Geographers speak in this case of a gateway city,⁶⁹ and Palmyra was a typical one. Due to global political developments, it found itself in a frontier location, from which it opened up to the Romans the large area lying beyond the Euphrates, while the Romans themselves were banned from crossing this vital river.

In spite of the cautious *détente* setting in between the two great empires during the Augusto-Tiberian period, the Palmyrenes continued to occupy a privileged position. Between them and the Parthians, confidence had grown in decades, which was utterly lacking in the relationship of the eastern great power to the Romans. Nothing proves this better than the journey of the Palmyrene called Alexandros who was sent by Germanicus on a diplomatic mission to the Parthian kingdom of Charakene.⁷⁰

If we accept this reconstruction, then Palmyra's ascent must have been owed twice to political conflicts which separated Mesopotamia from Syria. The first

time it came to pass was around 150 BC, with the demise of Seleucid power in Babylonia. Then again, the Romano-Parthian wars of the first century BC caused Palmyra to become the bottleneck of trans-continental commodity exchange between the Mediterranean and the Persian Gulf.

Yet the competing maritime route across the Red Sea stayed in business. The most important factor for the success of any trade route is costs: if the price ratio between alternate passages changes, trade will look out for new circuits. The costs for the southern route were practically invariable. Apart from two short episodes in Egypt, which were connected with the Roman civil wars (siege of Alexandria in 48/47 BC and Octavian's final battle against Antony and Cleopatra in 30 BC), peace prevailed in the country on the Nile. Its relationship with the Roman Empire was friendly in the Ptolemaic period; in 30 BC, Egypt had become a Roman province. Therefore, the whole expanse between Alexandria and the ports of the Red Sea was largely a pacified area, which from Augustus's time onwards came under the control of the Roman army. Here, costs were not incurred due to political changes, but solely to the uninviting natural environment between the Nile and the Red Sea. Fresh water was nowhere available in the area, the maintenance of trade routes and seaports was immensely expensive.⁷¹

The conditions in the Near East were exactly the other way round. Logistically, in spite of the desert, which could be crossed here as well, the continental northern route was far more manageable than the southern route. Here, costs arose due to high political risks: apart from the Parthians, there were the nomads of the Syrian Desert, who repeatedly preyed on trade goods. The key to making the route profitable was therefore to eliminate these two risk factors. That the gateway-city of Palmyra owned this key and knew how to deal with it, became more than manifest in the century after Germanicus, when it became the leading trading power of the Roman world.

Notes

- 1 PAT 1524 = Inv. 11,100.
- 2 As proposed by Robert Du Mesnil du Buisson, "Première campagne de fouilles à Palmyre," *Comptes Rendus de l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres* (1966): 181–85 and Rudolf Fellmann, "Palmyra zwischen Hellenismus und Römerzeit," in *Palmyra. Geschichte, Kunst und Kultur der syrischen Oasenstadt*, ed. Erwin Maria Ruprechtsberger, Linzer Archäologische Forschungen (Linz: Druck- und Verlagsanstalt Gutenberg, 1987), 123; contra Ted Kaizer, *The Religious Life of Palmyra. A Study of the Social Patterns of Worship in the Roman Period* (Stuttgart: Steiner, 2002), 78f.; for an intermediate position Stefan R. Hauser, "Tempel für den palmyrenischen Bel," in *Getrennte Wege? Kommunikation, Raum und Wahrnehmung in der Alten Welt*, ed. Robert Rollinger, Andreas Luther, and Josef Wiesehöfer, Oikumene. Studien zur antiken Weltgeschichte (Berlin: Verlag Antike, 2007), 246–49.
- 3 Fellmann, 123–26.
- 4 On the archaeological investigation of the Hellenistic city: Andreas Schmidt-Colinet and Hālid al-As'ad, "Zur Urbanistik des hellenistischen Palmyra. Ein Vorbericht," *Damaszener Mitteilungen* 12 (2000); "Archaeological news from hellenistic Palmyra," *Parthica* 4 (2002); Andreas Schmidt-Colinet, "Nouvelles données sur Palmyre hellénistique," in *La Syrie hellénistique*, ed. Maurice Sartre, Topoi Supplément

- (Paris: De Boccard, 2003); “Untersuchungen zur Urbanistik des hellenistischen Palmyra,” in *Kulturkonflikte im Vorderen Orient an der Wende vom Hellenismus zur römischen Kaiserzeit*, ed. Klaus Stefan Freyberger, Agnes Henning and Henner von Hesberg, Orient-Archäologie (Rahden/Westfalen: Verlag Marie Leidorf, 2003); “Kurzbericht über die Arbeiten in Palmyra 2005,” *Deutsch/österreichisch-syrisches Kooperationsprojekt in Palmyra* (2005) and now the comprehensive publication by Andreas Schmidt-Colinet and Walid al-As‘ad, eds., *Palmyras Reichtum durch weltweiten Handel. Archäologische Untersuchungen im Bereich der hellenistischen Stadt*, 2 vols. (Wien: Holzhausen Verlag, 2013).
- 5 Andreas Schmidt-Colinet, “Einleitung,” in *Palmyras Reichtum durch weltweiten Handel. Archäologische Untersuchungen im Bereich der Hellenistischen Stadt*, ed. Andreas Schmidt-Colinet and Walid al-As‘ad (Wien: Holzhausen Verlag, 2013), 75.
 - 6 Ibid., 77f. The museum has fallen victim to extensive vandalism while Palmyra has been occupied by ISIS militia. The objects destroyed include the findings from the Hellenistic city.
 - 7 Jörg W. E. Fassbinder and Roland Linck, “Geophysikalische Prospektion,” in *Palmyras Reichtum durch weltweiten Handel. Archäologische Untersuchungen im Bereich der Hellenistischen Stadt*, ed. Andreas Schmidt-Colinet and Walid al-As‘ad (Wien: Holzhausen Verlag, 2013), 82–83.
 - 8 Ibid., 86f.
 - 9 Schmidt-Colinet, “Einleitung,” 76.
 - 10 Georg A. Plattner, “Sondage I. Eine hellenistisch-römische Straßenkreuzung und angrenzende Wohnbebauung. Baubefund, Architektur, Chronologie,” in Schmidt-Colinet and al-As‘ad, *Palmyras Reichtum*, 97–103.
 - 11 Fanette Laubenheimer and Christiane Römer-Strehl, “Hellenistische Amphorenstempel,” in Schmidt-Colinet and al-As‘ad, *Palmyras Reichtum*.
 - 12 Christiane Römer-Strehl, “Keramik,” in Schmidt-Colinet and al-As‘ad, *Palmyras Reichtum*, 20–21.
 - 13 Georg A. Plattner, “Sondage I. Eine hellenistisch-römische Straßenkreuzung und angrenzende Wohnbebauung. Baubefund, Architektur, Chronologie,” in Schmidt-Colinet and al-As‘ad, *Palmyras Reichtum*, 116.
 - 14 Christine Ertel and René Ployer, “Sondage II. Ein späthellenistisch-römisches Hofhaus. Baubefund, Architektur, Chronologie,” in Schmidt-Colinet and al-As‘ad, *Palmyras Reichtum*; “A Roman residential house in the ‘hellenistic’ town of Palmyra. Archaeology, function and urban aspects – vessel glass,” in *Palmyrena. City, hinterland and caravan trade between Orient and Occident*, ed. Jörgen Christian Meyer, Eivind Heldaas Seland and Nils Anfinset (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2016), 93–95.
 - 15 Römer-Strehl, “Keramik,” 30–31.
 - 16 Ibid., 20–21.
 - 17 Ibid., 20.
 - 18 Above, p. 46.
 - 19 Arsaces: Strab. 11,9,3; cf. George Rawlinson, *Parthia, The Story of the Nations*. 2nd ed. (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1894), 47–50; Neilson Caryl Debevoise, *A Political History of Parthia* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1938), 9–11.
 - 20 Thus on the implementation of Parthian overlordship Peter M. Edwell, *Between Rome and Persia. The Middle Euphrates, Mesopotamia and Palmyra under Roman Control* (London: Routledge, 2008), 101–02; similarly, Leonardo Gregoratti, “Dura-Europos. A Greek town of the Parthian empire,” in *Religion, Society and Culture at Dura-Europos*, ed. Ted Kaizer, Yale Classical Studies (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 17. Releasing Demetrios, who had been taken captive by the Parthians, Phraates had triggered a civil war in the Seleucid Empire and thus contributed to further weakening the Hellenistic kingdom. Cf. Kay Ehling, “Seleukidische Geschichte zwischen 130 und 121 v. Chr.,” *Historia* 47 (1998): 141–44.

- 21 Josef Wiesehöfer, *Das antike Persien. Von 550 v. Chr. bis 650 n. Chr.* (Zürich: Artemis und Winkler, 1993), 185–86.
- 22 Edwell, *Between Rome and Persia*, 101–02.
- 23 Fergus Millar, “Dura-Europos under Parthian rule,” in *Das Partherreich und seine Zeugnisse*, ed. Josef Wiesehöfer (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 1998); Gregoratti, “Dura-Europos”; Sommer, *Roms orientalische Steppengrenze*, 9, 275–77. On the architectural history of the iwan Henri Frankfort, “The origin of the Bît Hilani,” *Iraq* 14 (1952).
- 24 For a comprehensive study see Susan B. Downey, *Mesopotamian Religious Architecture. Alexander through the Parthians* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988).
- 25 Michael Rostovtzeff, *Dura and the Problem of Parthian Art* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1935); Malcolm A. R. Colledge, *Parthian Art* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1977); Roman Ghirshman, *Iran. Parther und Sasaniden*, vol. 3, *Universum der Kunst* (München: C. H. Beck, 1962), 33–117 and now Lucinda Dirven, “The problem with Parthian art at Dura,” in *Religion, Society and Culture at Dura-Europos*, ed. Ted Kaizer, Yale Classical Studies (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016) and the contributions in Bruno Jacobs, ed. “*Parthische Kunst*” – *Kunst im Partherreich* (Duisburg: Wellem Verlag, 2014).
- 26 Wiesehöfer, *Das antike Persien*, 197–99; Michael Sommer, *Hatra. Geschichte und Kultur einer Karawanenstadt im römisch-parthischen Mesopotamien* (Mainz am Rhein: Philipp von Zabern, 2003), 16–18; “In the twilight. Hatra between Rome and Iran,” in *Hatra. Politics, Culture and Religion between Parthia and Rome*, ed. Lucinda Dirven, *Oriens et Occidens* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 2013), 38–44.
- 27 By far the best investigation of the political dynamism is provided by Richard Fowler, “King, bigger king, king of kings. Structuring power in the Parthian world,” in *Kingdoms and Principalities in the Roman Near East*, ed. Ted Kaizer and Margherita Facella, *Oriens et Occidens* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 2010), especially 71–75.
- 28 Erich S. Gruen, *The Hellenistic World and the Coming of Rome* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984), 658–60; Gwyn Morgan, “The perils of schematism. Polybius, Antiochus Epiphanes and the ‘Day of Eleusis,’” *Historia* 39 (1990); Peter Franz Mittag, *Antiochos IV. Epiphanes. Eine politische Biographie* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2006), 214–23. On the Roman expansion in the Hellenistic East also Arthur M. Eckstein, *Rome Enters the Greek East. From Anarchy to Hierarchy in the Hellenistic Mediterranean, 230–170 B.C.* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008).
- 29 The Roman course of action is reported by Polyb. 39,4–6. Cf. Gruen, *The Hellenistic World*, 523–27.
- 30 The concept of client kingship was first introduced by Ernst Badian, *Foreign Clientelae (264–70 B.C.)* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958). Gruen, 158–200, in an elaborate excursus, has made an attempt at deconstructing client kingship as an anachronism. In the same tradition stands the detailed investigation by Paul J. Burton, *Friendship and Empire. Roman Diplomacy and Imperialism in the Middle Republic (353–146 BC)* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011). Cf. also Peter Kehne, “‘Externae gentes’ und ‘regna inter fines’ im Nordgrenzbereich des Imperium Romanum vom 1. bis zum 3. Jh. Eine Kritik der Klientelstaaten-Theorie,” *Eos* 87 (2000); Paul J. Burton, “Clientela or Amicitia? Modeling Roman international behavior in the middle Republic (246–146 BC),” *Klio* 85 (2003). Most recently, however, a number of scholars have concluded that the concept is rather a “helpful ‘metaphor’” (Ernst Baltrusch and Julia Wilker, “*Amici – socii – clientes?* Abhängige Herrschaft im Imperium Romanum,” in *Amici – socii – clientes? Abhängige Herrschaft im Imperium Romanum*, ed. Ernst Baltrusch and Julia Wilker, Edition Topoi (Berlin: Exzellenzcluster Topoi der Freien Universität Berlin und der Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, 2015), 11) that can be applied to the Roman Republic and its relationship to local dynasts as well as to the imperial period. Cf. Altay Coşkun, “Freundschaft und Klientelbildung in Roms

auswärtigen Beziehungen. Wege und Perspektiven der Forschung,” in *Roms auswärtige Freunde in der späten Republik und im frühen Prinzipat*, ed. Altay Coşkun (Göttingen: Duehrkohp & Radicke, 2005); Ted Kaizer and Margherita Facella, “Introduction,” in *Kingdoms and Principalities in the Roman Near East*, ed. Ted Kaizer and Margherita Facella, *Oriens et Occidens* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 2010), 22–26; Christian Wendt, “*More clientium*. Roms Perspektive auf befreundete Fürsten,” in Ernst Baltrusch and Julia Wilker, *Amici – socii – clientes?*. An interesting archaeological perspective is added by Günther Schörner, “Rom jenseits der Grenze. Klientelkönigtümer und der impact of empire,” in *Frontiers in the Roman World. Proceedings of the Ninth Workshop of the International Network Impact of Empire* (Durham, 16–19 April 2009), ed. Olivier Hekster and Ted Kaizer, *Impact of Empire* (Leiden: Brill, 2011).

- 31 Théodore Reinach, *Mithradates Eupator. König von Pontos* (Leipzig: Teubner, 1895); Brian C. McGing, *The Foreign Policy of Mithridates VI Eupator, King of Pontus*, *Mnemosyne Supplementum* (Leiden: Brill, 1986); Paolo Desideri, “Mitridate e Roma,” in *L'impero mediterraneo. I: La repubblica imperiale*, ed. Guido Clemente, Filippo Coarelli, and Emilio Gabba, *Storia di Roma* (Torino: Giulio Einaudi, 1990); John G. F. Hind, “Mithridates,” in *The Last Age of the Roman Republic, 146–43 B.C.*, ed. John A. Crook, Andrew W. Lintott and Elizabeth Rawson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994). On the history of the kingdoms of Asia Minor Christoph Michels, *Kulturtransfer und monarchischer “Philhellenismus.” Bithynien, Pontos und Kappadokien in hellenistischer Zeit*, vol. 4, *Schriften zur politischen Kommunikation* (Göttingen: V & R unipress, 2009); Christian Marek, *Geschichte Kleinasiens in der Antike* (München: Verlag C. H. Beck, 2010), 318–64.
- 32 The best overview is Attilio Mastrocinque, *Studi sulle guerre Mitridatiche*, vol. 124, *Historia Einzelschriften* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 1999).
- 33 Marek, *Geschichte Kleinasiens*, 364–68; Maurice Sartre, *The Middle East Under Rome*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 31–53; Robin Seager, *Pompey the Great. A Political Biography*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 53–62.
- 34 *Psalms* 2:2. For the context Klaus Bringmann, *Geschichte der Juden im Altertum. Vom babylonischen Exil bis zur arabischen Eroberung* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 2005).
- 35 *Psalms* 2:27–28.
- 36 For the context see Bringmann, *Geschichte der Juden*, 165–67.
- 37 Talbert, *Barrington Atlas*, 1046.
- 38 Strab. 16,2,10: τῶν πλησίον φυλάρχων ἐχόντων.
- 39 Cf. Andreas Kropp, “Earrings, *nefesh* and *opus reticulatum*. Self-representation of the house of Emesa in the first century AD,” in *Kingdoms and Principalities in the Roman Near East*, ed. Ted Kaizer and Margherita Facella, *Oriens et Occidens* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 2010), 200.
- 40 Strab. 16,2,10.
- 41 Polyb. 5,71 mentions the Mennaioi, who had some political sway in Mount Lebanon as early as around 200 BC.
- 42 Strab. 16,2,10. Cf. Gawlikowski, “Palmyra as a trading centre,” *Iraq* 56 (1994): 2.
- 43 Strab. 16,2,11.: ἀνδρῶν σκηνιτῶν τὸ πλεόν.
- 44 Ibid.: ἡμερώτεροι.
- 45 Ibid.: Ἀραβες καὶ σκηνῖται.
- 46 Ibid.: συντεταγμένας μάλλον.
- 47 Josef Dobiáš, “Les premiers rapports des Romains avec les Parthes et l’occupation de la Syrie,” *Archív Orientální* 3 (1931); Katarzyna Maksymiuk, *Geography of Roman–Iranian Wars* (Siedlce: Uniwersytet Przyrodniczo-Humanistyczny w Siedlcach, 2015); Dieter Timpe, *Geschichte der politischen Beziehungen zwischen Römer- und Partherreich*. (Habilitationsschrift, Freiburg, 1963); Giuseppe Zecchini, “Il bipolarismo romano-iranico,” in *L’equilibrio internazionale dagli antichi ai moderni*, ed.

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 - 50 Sartre, *Middle East*, 51–53.
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 - 53 Olivier Hekster and Ted Kaizer, "Mark Antony and the raid on Palmyra. Reflections on Appian, *Bella Civilia* V, 9," *Latomus* 63 (2004).
 - 54 Above, p. 63–64.
 - 55 Andreas Schmidt-Colinet, "Zusammenfassung," in *Palmyras Reichtum durch weltweiten Handel. Archäologische Untersuchungen im Bereich der Hellenistischen Stadt*, ed. Andreas Schmidt-Colinet and Walid al-As'ad (Wien: Holzhausen Verlag, 2013), 274.
 - 56 Ibid., 270.
 - 57 PAT 1352 = Inv. 4 6a, b = CIS 3924f. = Monika Schuol, *Die Charakene. Ein mesopotamisches Königreich in hellenistisch-parthischer Zeit* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 2000), 48–49. Cf. Michał Gawlikowski, *Palmyre VI. Le temple palmyrénien. Étude d'épigraphie et de topographie historique* (Warszawa: PWN, 1973), 68; Axel Gebhardt, *Imperiale Politik und provinzielle Entwicklung. Untersuchungen zum Verhältnis Kaiser, Heer und Städten im Syrien der vorseverischen Zeit*, vol. 4, *Klio. Beiträge zur Alten Geschichte* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2002), 35; Kaizer, *Religious Life*, 70.
 - 58 Daniel Schlumberger, "Bornes frontières de la Palmyrène," *Syria* 20 (1939): 61–63 = IGLS 5 2550. Cf. Gebhardt, *Imperiale Politik*, 4, 34.
 - 59 PAT 2754. According to this inscription, Germanicus dispatched Alexandros, a Palmyrene, to a diplomatic mission to the kingdom of Charakene (c. AD 18). Cf. Lucinda Dirven, *The Palmyrenes of Dura-Europos. A Study of Religious Interaction in Roman Syria* (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 20.
 - 60 PAT 0259 = CIS 3913 = OGIS 629 = IGR III 1056. Cf. Kenneth K. A. Lönnqvist, "The tax law of Palmyra and the introduction of the Roman monetary system to Syria. A re-evaluation," in *Jebel Bishri in Context. Introduction to the Archaeological Studies and the Neighbourhood of Jebel Bishri in Central Syria. Proceedings Of A Nordic Research Training Seminar in Syria, May 2004*, ed. Minna Lönnqvist, BAR International Series (Oxford: Hadrian Books Ltd, 2008), 76.
 - 61 AE 1933, 204. Cf. Gebhardt, *Imperiale Politik*, 4, 35.
 - 62 CIL 06 40348: *proco(n)s(ul) mi[ssus in transmarinas provincias Asiae in conformandis iis regnisque eiusdem tractus ex mandatis Ti(beri) Caesaris Au[g]usti*.
 - 63 Millar, *Roman Near East*, 53–54.
 - 64 Armenia was a peculiar case because it was continuously disputed between Rome and the Parthian Empire. Of the four major Romano–Parthian conflicts in the first and second centuries AD, three broke out over Armenia.

- 65 Schmidt-Colinet, "Zusammenfassung," 275.
- 66 This would have been the far easier passage from the Euphrates to the Mediterranean, favourable political circumstances provided. By comparison, the route via the desert and Palmyra was arduous and logistically challenging. Cf. Gary K. Young, *Rome's Eastern Trade. International Commerce and Imperial Policy. 31 BC–AD 305* (London: Routledge, 2001), 137–38.
- 67 Above, p. 57.
- 68 Plin. nat. 5,88.
- 69 Andrew F. Burghardt, "A hypothesis about gateway cities," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 61 (1971).
- 70 Above, p.77 n. 59.
- 71 Matthew Adam Cobb, "The chronology of Roman trade in the Indian Ocean from Augustus to early third century CE." *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 58 (2015) 375–79; "The exchange of goods from Italy to India during the early Roman Empire. The range of travelling times," *Ancient West & East* 13 (2014): 89–109; Steven E. Sidebotham, "Ports of the Red Sea and the Arabia-India trade," in *The Eastern Frontier of the Roman Empire. Proceedings of a Colloquium held at Ankara in September 1988*, ed. D. H. French and C. S. Lightfoot, BAR (Oxford: BAR, 1989).

5 In the wake of the Empire

At the time of Germanicus, Palmyra was an important place at the fringe of the Roman Empire. The still-young city was significant enough to be visited by a major representative of the Julio-Claudian dynasty. For Rome's frontier management system in the Near East, the oasis in the middle of the Syrian Desert was an indispensable cornerstone. At this point, though, none of the buildings, which would later leave their distinctive mark on the townscape, making Palmyra renowned in modern times as the Venice of the East, were yet standing. The city's rise as a global metropolis of long-distance trade had only just begun.

Pluriverse of identities: the Roman Empire

Palmyra's rise began outside the reach of the Roman world, out in the steppe's no man's land between the province of Syria, the expanses of the Arabian Desert and the Parthian Empire. Rome was the political, but also the economic, factor without which the settlement in the oasis would have remained a sleepy provincial backwater. Only the strategic calculation of the world power in the Mediterranean West, particularly the demand of its elites for luxury goods, manoeuvred Palmyra into its key position along the Syro-Mesopotamian long-distance trade route to India, which was rapidly growing in importance. It is time now to take a look at the Empire, on whose edges Palmyra thrived to reach its splendour.

The nucleus of what is to date the world's greatest empire was a town on the lower course of the Tiber river in central Italy. The Romans, who knew little about their own early history, regarded the year 753 BC as the founding date of their city. Rome was at first anything but dynamic, but it benefited from its favorable traffic position at the ford across the river Tiber and various cultural influences overlapping here: Etruscans and Greeks both had their share in the development of Latium, the region in which Rome was situated. Around 500 BC, the Romans got rid of their kings, the city became a republic. About 100 years later, they subjected the neighbouring town of Veii. The city-state turned into an increasingly aggressive territorial state, which soon became a hegemonic power in Central Italy, and, a further 100 years on, all over Italy. Rome took the first step overseas in 264 BC, engaging in a trial of strength with Carthage, the dominant sea power of the time. Two wars later, in 201 BC, Rome was the undisputed power centre of

the entire western Mediterranean. Only half a century later, the battle-hardened legions from the Tiber razed Carthage to the ground, turned Greece into a province and shifted the strategic equilibrium in the Near East and Egypt in Rome's favour to such an extent, that even there no political decisions could be taken against the will of the Senate and the people of Rome. In 133 BC, Rome had set up its province of Asia, the first one on the continent; in 64 BC, the province of Syria, its bridgehead in the Levant.¹

The forces behind this unparalleled record of expansion provide a perennial issue of dispute among ancient historians. Was it, as Theodor Mommsen believed, the shock from the catastrophic defeat suffered by Rome against the Celts on the river Allia at the beginning of the fourth century BC, which induced Roman policy to a strategy of "defensive imperialism"?² The black day, the *dies ater*, left deep marks indeed on the collective psyche of the Romans. The city had only by a hair's breadth escaped complete destruction at the hands of barbarians. Such a humiliation should occur never again. Was then, as Mommsen claims, the safety concerns of politicians the reason why they conceived an aggressive military doctrine calling for conquest after conquest of new buffer zones?

An alternative interpretation largely prevails in Anglo-Saxon scholarship, suggesting that the Roman elite was intrinsically belligerent. In Rome, more than anywhere else, minors were coached for a military career and were sworn to an ethics of violence. According to this view, it was the Roman system of values, which revolved around the central virtue, *virtus*, which was responsible for the fact that the Roman *res publica* – and above all its ruling elite – had a more militaristic, expansionist and imperialist character than any other Mediterranean society.³

Plenty of evidence seems to support this model of interpretation, though at a second glance, it drops dramatically in plausibility. In the first couple of centuries before the Common Era, Rome was certainly not the only political actor apt to be aggressive, keen on weapons and belligerent. Wars were almost everywhere a daily occurrence. Rome's Italic relations, no less than Greeks, Carthaginians and Macedonians, were almost incessantly involved in bloody quarrels. What Macedonians expected from their king, not only since Alexander, was, first and foremost, for him to be victorious. In the Hellenistic world, rulers were almost always busy waging war, in order to meet this expectation.⁴ The world into which Rome was expanding was not, therefore, a haven of peace and stability. It was violent, disordered, anarchic.⁵ In such a Darwinian "international" system, the strongest player survived: Rome.

Why was it so? On closer inspection, it was not the militarism of its elite, which gave Rome the decisive advantage over its rivals, but an institutional particularity of the Roman Republic instead. In the centuries up to about 400 BC, Rome had evolved along lines quite similar to those of a Greek polis. Rome was a city state, which was devised as a political unity of the city itself and the rural surroundings. It had a comparatively weak king and a relatively strong aristocracy, the patriciate. The citizens capable of bearing arms gathered at the people's assembly, where decisions were made. Some details, such as the pronounced tribal structure of society, distinguished Rome from a polis like Athens;

the similarities, however, outweighed them. Just like the Greek cities, Rome was involved in border conflicts and wars for plunder with its neighbours.

Shortly after AD 400, Rome subjugated Veii, the neighbouring Etruscan town, destroyed it and enslaved the surviving part of the population, appropriating their land. Apparently, the leadership by the Tiber was dissatisfied with the results of this first tentative annexation of foreign territories, for the procedure was immediately put aside. After that, the Romans followed a different strategy. Whenever they subjected a town or a tribe, they imposed upon them a bilateral treaty, a *foedus*. The alliance settled rights and duties of both partners, above all leaving the subjected population a far-reaching autonomy, obliging them, however, to provide service in warfare to Rome. The alliance system developed a dynamism of its own, since the Romans disconnected being Roman from the physical city of Rome – a concept of citizenship inconceivable from a Greek point of view. Roman citizens founded a network of towns, the so-called *coloniae*, all over Italy, remaining, in spite of that, Roman citizens. Even more groundbreaking was the practice of conferring Roman citizenship on the ruling elites of many subjected communities as well. In special cases, whole cities could acquire the *civitas Romana*.⁶

Tacitus, the historian writing in the second century AD, has already pointed out the connection between the expansion of Roman power and the liberal bestowal of its citizenship. “What else proved fatal to Lacedaemon and Athens, in spite of their power in arms, but their policy of holding the conquered aloof as alien-born?” The Romans on the other hand, took a more statesmanlike approach: “But the sagacity of our own founder Romulus was such that several times he fought and naturalized a people in the course of the same day! Strangers have been kings over us.” Rome’s secret success, Tacitus concludes, consisted in the fact that every subjected victim of Roman expansionism could be lured by the perspective of rising among the rulers of the world.⁷

There is little to be added to this brilliant analysis. By means of alliances and the granting of citizenship, while reducing the cost of enforcement of their domination, the Romans enlarged the pool of prospective fighters, and with it its military potential, to such an extent that no one in Italy, and soon in the entire Mediterranean, was even nearly on a par with them. If there is a clue to Rome’s expansion of power, then it is inherent in the way Romans treated the subjected people. Within only few generations, the subjected rose to the level of partakers in Rome’s success. And the indicator of this participation was citizenship.

This does not change the fact that the Empire built by the Republic was founded on force and violence: like all empires, Rome had become great and mighty through conquest. Yet, already, its policy in Italy marked a turning point. The boundary between core people and the subjected ones became more and more permeable; the civic body defined itself neither territorially, nor ethnically or culturally. Essentially, everybody who was loyal to the Roman cause, could become a Roman. This applied to individuals as well as to entire cities. Nevertheless, up to the first century BC, there was strong resistance in Italy to an enfranchisement imposed by Rome. The Italic peoples wanted to be on equal footing with the Romans – they did not want to become Roman. It was over

the issues of participation and assimilation that a bloody war broke out between Rome and its allies in Italy in 91 BC. After two years, Rome got the upper hand. The allies were indeed granted full participation, however at the price of complete assimilation. In the course of only a few decades, the peoples of Italy utterly lost, as Roman citizens, their identities, which had been grown over centuries. The former Etruscans, Samnites, Lucanians and Umbrians had now become Romans.⁸

The process which had taken place in Italy, typically shows that Rome had become an historical anomaly among empires. Great empires such as Assyria or Persia had, as seen above,⁹ dispensed with any sort of cultural mission. Even the Seleucid Empire was a patchwork of quite heterogeneous ethnicities, religions and language groups – and had no problem with it. A levelling effect, at best, was produced by the proclaimed synthesis between ancient Iranian and new Greco-Macedonian elites in the Empire. As far as the country at large was concerned, however, the new rulers took no pains to overcome gaps and build cultural bridges. The Empire could live very well with diversity, as long as no one revoked their loyalty to the king.¹⁰

This was not fundamentally different in the Roman Empire. Unlike its predecessors, however, the Empire had a whole range of stories at hand, which constituted an offer to the inhabitants to detach themselves at least partially from their historical identities and to feel themselves to be an integral part of the Empire. Arguably the most important of these narratives was about social advancement. Whoever came from one of the countless provinces subjected by Rome, could hope that some day his children might become Roman citizens, his grandchildren members of the equestrian order, and his great-grandchildren as much as senators, consuls, or even emperor. In particular, the Republic's bankruptcy since the forties of the first century BC had made the prospect of social advancement much more plausible. Owing to the fact that in the political system of the principate, as it took shape, citizenship became completely detached from political participation, the enfranchisement of ever-new groups hardly met with resistance. Nonetheless, citizenship still continued to signify symbolic and material privileges. It was the entrance ticket to the Empire's upper crust. The more so as, in the provinces, Roman citizenship was synonymous with elite status.¹¹

For the second narrative, the people of antiquity had the word *mythos*, meaning "story." Mythology is the attempt of a society to make sense of its past. It answers the central questions of every thinking creature: Who am I? Where do I come from? Themes of classical mythology include the origin of the world and the cosmos, the creation of mankind and the acquisition of certain skills by man. Initially, myths were locally limited traditional stories linked to specific sites, relating facts about the tellers' own ancestors and their deeds, usually accompanied by coloured embellishments. They were often charter myths, dealing with the origin of a city and its founder, a glorified hero. As early as their "colonization" of remote coasts from the eighth century BC, the Greeks started to systematize and universalize the contents of mythology. In this way, an "international medium of communication" was created, which dissociated itself from local, and even cultural, linguistic and ethnic contexts, comprising in itself the

entire civilized world known to the Greeks: the Oikumene. "Greek mythology became thus an exportable mass commodity."¹²

With time, mythology had evolved into a system that helped people determine who they were and where they came from, which could be appropriated by non-Greeks as well, provided they had sufficient education (*paideia*). Mythology placed such distant cities as, say, the Phoenician Tyre and the Greek Thebes in a context, since Kadmos had set off from Tyre and founded Thebes. Likewise, mythology could relocate a well-known story, like the nymph Daphne's flight from love-crazed god Apollo, to a specific place (such as Antioch's suburb of Daphne) and thus integrate this place within the network of mythical geography. Migration and travel myths could depict real and imaginary entanglement, such as the story of Aeneas, the refugee from Troy who founded Alba Longa, the settlement preceding Rome in Central Italy, and stopped at Carthage during his journey through the Mediterranean. The tragic love story between the travelling hero and the Carthaginian queen Dido-Elissa, taking place in Carthage according to the Roman myth of Aeneas, explains the origins of the traditional enmity between the two cities.¹³

If mythology, as it were, mapped the Oikumene, it was Rome's mission to form it politically into a unity. The civilization of the world by the benevolent hegemon Rome was, therefore, the third narrative, and it allowed those who were subjected to identify themselves with the Roman cause. Rome, as was well known, stood for culture, education, technologies and security guarantees, the purpose of all of which being to make life more comfortable. If one suffered from the winter cold and learned from the Romans how to make glass and a window out of it, one had every reason to be grateful to the occupiers. Anyone who was able to travel from Britain to Egypt without being hindered by pirates, swamps, rivers, high mountains, and all sorts of legal uncertainty, had to admire the civilizing achievements of Roman jurists and civil engineers who had made all this possible. Out of the obvious civilizational superiority of the Empire, its intellectual elites put together a narrative which made Rome's world domination look like a stroke of good fortune. In a pompous speech to the city of Rome, the Greek orator Aelius Aristides wrapped this narrative with the charming words, that as foretold by Homer, the Romans had transformed the whole world with their streets and bridges, their justice, knowledge and language, "into a single household."¹⁴ This is not far from the message proclaimed in Vergil's Aeneid that the authority (*imperium*) of Rome is without limit in time and space (*sine fine*). The message is uttered by none less than Iuppiter, the supreme god.¹⁵

The function and effect of the three narratives are obvious: they gave the inhabitants of the Empire the feeling that regardless of their origin and cultural imprint, their interests were well cared for by the Romans; that they lived in a society of open opportunities; and that they were better off than all the poor wretches who were more or less miserably vegetating outside the borders of the Empire. Unlike all the great powers of the past, the Romans founded their rule neither entirely on political force, nor completely on transcendental justifications. For the Assyrians it had been sufficient that their king was the representative of the supreme imperial god Assur. For the Egyptians and Persians it had not been any

different. Alexander and his successors had appealed to the victor's right. The land over which they ruled had been obtained through the spear, thereby precluding any kind of doubt on the power of the Macedonian conquerors. The Romans, on the other hand, banked on the power of conviction.

On accepting these three stories, one was virtually a Roman already. Being Roman was, only on a purely formal level, defined by the possession of Roman citizenship. Origin and race practically played no role at all, while language and education, *paideia*, were of great importance. Who regarded mythology as the means which defined their place in the world, who believed in the blessings of Roman civilization, and was convinced of their own advancement opportunities in the indeed hierarchical, but fundamentally permeable imperial society, was a Roman. Besides that, an at least rudimentary knowledge of the Greco-Roman educational canon was indispensable. And for that, again, the knowledge of at least one of the two key imperial languages – Latin or Greek – was a prerequisite.

What made Rome different from other empires, then, was that it offered lots of people the promise of a certain degree of participation. Where it ruled, the Empire was not a foreign body: it exercised integrative power instead. Anyone within its range possessed something like an imperial patriotism: they identified themselves with the Empire, which was viewed as a community of shared destiny, and with its leadership. Loyalty to the emperor and his laws was not imposed from the outside, but rather sprang from an inner need. One could speak of a community with a proto-national identity, into which the Empire welded together large sections of its population from the beginning of the imperial period. "Proto-national" is the term, because Rome, unlike modern nation states, did not make any effort to speed up this process. There was no state education system, no attempt to stifle competing identities, no violent suppression of local languages and worldviews. Above all, the basic narratives did not develop the same integrative power everywhere. Just as the governance intensity of empires was unequally spread, Roman identity revealed different "density" levels in its community. The Empire and, in particular, its political and intellectual elites were, however, in broad outlines, an "imagined community" as well, whose core is typically composed of exactly such narratives as those circulating in the Roman world.¹⁶

What was special about this was that, in order to belong to the imperial imagined community, no one had to give up their affiliation to other communities: one could be Roman, Greek, Athenian or Palmyrene, all at the same time, and no one bothered.¹⁷ Different layers of collective identity could, like today, be overlapped and interwoven. The Roman Empire as a pluriverse of identities rested on three imaginary pillars: citizenship, *paideia* and the civilizing mission of Rome. They made this Empire unique and gave it a duration which was hardly to be ever met by any other state.

Romanization

Closely related to the three narratives is the problem of "Romanization." The glamorous concept, which was originally introduced by Theodor Mommsen and Francis

Haverfield, is today highly controversial among scholars. Deeply rooted in the idea of the nation state of the nineteenth century as they were, for both historians Romanization meant total disappearance of local traditions and their consistent replacement by the Latin language, Roman law, Roman customs and value patterns, as well as a material culture of Mediterranean imprint. For Mommsen, Romanization is the “masterpiece of the imperial age in global history.”¹⁸ In his lectures, he described procedures such as the reshaping of Spain by means of urbanization and the introduction of Roman law, as a process steered from above and energetically promoted by Augustus and his successors: “And the plan was consistently pursued up to Vespasian, who Latinized in this way all of the peninsula.”¹⁹

Haverfield’s concept of Romanization is less monolithic than Mommsen’s and less functionalist. “Rome made her culture more attractive by not thrusting it upon her subjects,” he wrote in his major work *The Romanization of Roman Britain*.²⁰ For Haverfield, the success of Romanization is due not so much to a master plan, of whatever kind, conceived by the Roman leadership, but much rather to the provinces’ aspiration to belong to the commonwealth of Roman civilization.²¹ Moreover, Haverfield sees Romanization as a comprehensive process taking hold of language, material culture, political identity and religion.²² It did not enjoy total uniformity and it did not proceed everywhere at the same pace; in the long run, however, differences were levelled, and local peculiarities were pushed aside into a sort of “latent persistence.” Thus, “the provincial had become a Roman, but he could still undergo an atavistic reversion to the ways of his forefathers.”²³

Haverfield’s pioneering work has laid the foundation stone for the study of the Roman provinces in the last one hundred years. The idea that Romanization as a rule took place from below, not from above, since provinces wanted to participate in Roman civilization, was already vaguely present in his work.²⁴ Nevertheless, Haverfield’s linguistic gesture is unmistakably that of the colonial master. Like many of his contemporaries, he implicitly identified the Roman with the British Empire. Both shared a civilizing mission, while their subjects shared backwardness, which could only be overcome by way of affiliation with the imperial civilization. For the mainstream of Anglo-Saxon scholarship today, the Romanization paradigm is practically disqualified because of its colonial implications. Haverfield’s assumption, that in the western provinces of the Empire, different societies with different degrees of complexity got into first-hand contact with each other, is now considered to be politically incorrect.²⁵

Apart from Romanization, the current discussion is dominated by two other keywords: “globalization” and “creolization.” Globalization is a favourite topic for obvious reasons: it removes the “Roman” versus “native” dichotomy, and at the same time makes Roman antiquity interesting to the modern world, offering a vivid picture of a supposed ancient globalization. It transforms the Roman Empire into an over-dimensional network and examines ties and interrelationships between spaces.²⁶ Nevertheless, this model clearly has its limitations: in the ancient world, as seen above,²⁷ globalization was a process which was not linked to political power; indeed, it drew its momentum from the crossing of political boundaries. The Phoenicians, who pushed forward to new shores,

were protagonists of globalization as much as Celtic mercenaries in the service of Sicilian tyrants, or as the Palmyrenes, who opened the gate to the Parthian Empire and to India. On the other hand, using the same analytical standards to measure only such interconnections as were triggered by Roman expansion and were made possible by Roman domination, would mean erasing the categories. It would be absurd to pretend that political power is completely irrelevant to processes of cultural change.²⁸

The second category, creolization, is heuristically rather challenging. The concept comes from linguistics, where, to put it simply, it indicates the emergence of a new, independent idiom from several source languages. Ethnology and sociology have adopted the term to describe the rise of new, hybrid cultures from the contact, encounter and interpenetration of groups of different cultural affiliation. Characteristic for creolization processes are political asymmetries, such as the ones playing a decisive role in the colonial interaction space of the Caribbean in the system of the transatlantic triangle trade.²⁹ The model of creolization, unlike that of globalization, does not remove at all the dichotomies between “colonial lords” and “natives.” It rejects, however, the older models of acculturation – especially Mommsen’s, less so Haverfield’s concept of Romanization – according to which, “natives” are merely passive recipients of a dominant and monolithic culture. Accepting the proposition, they are, on the contrary, active constructors and creative adopters, developing something new out of the old according to their own needs. Conversely, culture becomes highly fluid, a negotiation between the strong and the weak. If transposed to the situation in the Roman provinces, this means that instead of simply being assimilated and instead of taking over Roman civilization en bloc, the people in the provinces were creative players of an appropriation, which they themselves had started. At the same time, this implies that what was regarded as Roman, was not static but was subject to change.³⁰

Interestingly, the creolization concept converges with what could be called the continental Romanization paradigm. Researchers on the European continent, unlike those in the Anglo-Saxon world, have maintained the concept of Romanization, filling it, however, with completely new contents over the years, although this has largely remained unnoticed by their English-speaking colleagues.

No one sees Romanization today as a one-way street of the assimilation of a “culture” by another, but only as a dialectical process, which resulted in the often total reconfiguration of provincial everyday life, but at the same time affected the core of what was considered to be Roman.³¹ The best example is the conquest of Greece by the Roman Republic, which brought about at least as much change in Italy as in Greece. After a few generations, visiting a theatre and learning the Greek language were to the same degree a natural part of the everyday life of an educated Roman, as his putting on his toga, or his performing the morning’s *salutatio*, with which he received his clients. But not only the Greeks had something to give to the Romans. After the conquest of Gaul, the *braccae*, trousers worn by the local population, started becoming fashionable among the Romans, and from the third century onward, they were the preferred item of clothing of the former *gens togata*.

The dialectics of Romanization was effective in other, much more subtle, ways as well. Often Rome itself gave its subjected peoples the means to define themselves as a group for the first time, and to give expression to it. Cultural technologies which, while originally being Greek, had been adopted by the Romans, such as mythology or the anthropomorphic depiction of deities, allowed people everywhere in the Oikumene to assess their habitat and develop new conceptions of identity, even differentiating themselves from others, such as their neighbours. For instance, only Rome's presence made the Celtic tribes west of the Rhine into "Gauls," who gradually became aware of their common features, and, above all, of the things that separated them from their neighbours in the East, who, as a consequence, became "Germans." Without a specifically Gallo-Roman material culture, as we see it articulated, for example, in sacred architecture, the emergence of such a feeling of belonging would have been inconceivable. The rather paradoxical conclusion is, that if local and regional groups could make the Roman Empire a pluriverse of identities, it was mainly because Rome equipped them with the necessary resources.³²

Three levels of Romanization correspond, roughly, to the three constitutive narratives: legal Romanization to citizenship, linguistic-cultural Romanization to mythology, Romanization of material culture to the civilizing mission. They, again, aim at three layers of identity: legal Romanization at the political identity of individuals and communities, linguistic-cultural Romanization at cultural identity, Romanization of material culture at forms of identity manifesting themselves in *habitus*, practices and everyday activities. Each of these layers, in turn, has its own media, by means of which it can be identified and interpreted, according to the appropriate sources. Since Roman personal names consisted of three parts, the *tria nomina*, which was maintained unaltered up to the third century AD, in order to recognize the political identity of individuals, documents in which people are recorded with their full names will suffice. For cities, it is texts, often inscriptions, which give information about individuals' legal status – as *colonia*, *municipium* or *civitas*. People's linguistic-cultural identity tends to pose the greatest problems in interpretation. The key here are so-called egodocuments, which provide information about personal linguistic skills and the feeling of subjective belonging.³³ The layer of identity which manifests itself in everyday life, in the world of things, in *habitus* and practices, can be best apprehended by means of material culture, which in turn can be reconstructed through archaeological findings. Here, too, a methodologically sound hermeneutics is essential: pots are pots, not people, goes an old archaeologists' saying.³⁴ Therefore, the analysis should proceed from the objects themselves to the function they once had in people's lives. A temple is only significant if it allows conclusions to be made about the cults practiced in it, a plate has informative value only if it is possible to infer what it meant to its owners.³⁵

Legal Romanization means that individuals were given Roman citizenship, or whole cities the status of a Roman colony. The urbanization of previously rural landscapes had legal implications as well, making the inhabitants, according to their new status, citizens of their cities. Cities together with their rural territories

were virtually the autonomous cells of the Empire, which may best be described as a confederacy of cities.³⁶ Almost everywhere, towns and cities bordered on each other. It was urbanization which made the Empire governable at all for the Romans. Legal Romanization means also that Roman law was adopted in local communities too. Roman law applied to all Roman citizens, yet imperial and local law were often not mutually exclusive. In many places, the two legal systems competed together, without any significant problems incurring to the individual concerned.³⁷ At the same time, there is proof of several cases in which Roman law has been interpreted creatively, or very selectively, making recognizable use of local legal conceptions.³⁸

Romanization at linguistic-cultural and material levels is far more diffuse and more difficult to grasp because of the hermeneutic problems posed by the evidence. With good reason, scholars have abandoned the essentialist-monolithic approach to cultures. We have learned to see collective cultural identities as social constructions which do not simply exist within themselves, but are the result of social standardization,³⁹ which not infrequently owes its existence to confrontations with strangers.⁴⁰ If one accepts this, then no culture is "pure;" culture is, always and everywhere, hybrid. At the same time, it is dynamic, not static, subject to ongoing debate and negotiation. The Roman Empire is probably the best example of culture being hybrid and always in flux. Already in Rome's earliest days, it was not possible to clearly separate local Latin, Etruscan or Greek elements from one another.⁴¹ Later, for instance, such an ostensibly Roman phenomenon as the imperial cult absorbed all sorts of heterogeneous traditions reaching back into archaic Italy, as well as, by way of Hellenism, deep into the Ancient Near East.⁴²

So another model lends itself, which instead of focusing on compact "cultures," operates with the more flexible concept of "tradition." As in all societies, there were traditions in the Roman Empire, which due to historical vicissitudes, enjoyed high prestige and authority. This applies to the Latin and Roman national robe, the toga, as well as to the bathing culture or the Vitruvian guidelines for the construction of temples. But it applies to the Greek language too, which remained in all eastern provinces a *lingua franca* and, at a local level, the language of administration. Since the subjugated Greece, in Horace's words, had "conquered the untamed victor,"⁴³ its traditions had grown into the symbolic universe of the Empire, becoming an integral part of it. The same was true, to a much lesser extent, of local traditions such as the Gallic *braccae*, which likewise took over their place in that universe. The totality of all these traditions, which were closely connected to the imperial centre, can be labelled with the term "great tradition," as coined by the anthropologist Robert Redfield in the 1950s.⁴⁴

Alongside the great tradition, with its normative power and the concentrated impact of its authority, there exist at the local level innumerable "little traditions," which are hardly visible to the outside observer. That their reach, their prestige and their radiance are insignificant to the outside, does not mean that their effectiveness would not be felt in the everyday life of the people. Although the bearers of little traditions do acknowledge the hierarchy of orders and the superior prerogative of interpretation accredited to the great tradition, often, the more they are

exposed to the pressure of the great tradition, the more persistently they withdraw into the world of little tradition. The present globalization offers a profusion of examples of such withdrawal behaviour. Not infrequently, little traditions push to the surface as soon as political circumstances change. The great tradition of an empire looks then, in retrospect, like a thin coat of paint: a mere veneer to be wiped away by local societies with the dwindling of the big power. This interpretation, however, does not do justice to the manifold interactions between great and little traditions. By permeating, stimulating and distancing themselves from each other, none of the traditions really remains the same. Not even the great tradition – it can be interpreted quite differently in different places, whereby the local little traditions provide the framework for its interpretation.

The Greco-Roman Oikumene ideally fulfilled the requirements for a great tradition. Being a multiply hybrid synthesis of quasi modular character, it could always be dismantled into pieces, if needed, without its component parts losing their identity. The Oikumene was a symbolic system, whose constituent signs were always linked to the great tradition. However, depending on the context, they could be combined into new patterns. The open modular character of this phenomenon can be observed in architecture. The five columnal orders, as they were canonized by Vitruvius – Doric, Ionic, Corinthian, Tuscan and composite order – were widely visible landmarks of the imperial great tradition. Those who made use of these terms revealed their understanding of the architectural language prevalent in the Mediterranean, and expressed their willingness to belong to the Oikumene. With these terms, however, they would build very different buildings: a Gallo-Roman peripteral temple in Aachen, a colonnaded street in Tyre, or a “house tomb”⁴⁵ in Palmyra. None of these architectures was to be found in Athens or Rome, but they all made a visible reference to the building tradition associated with these two cities.⁴⁶

So there was not one Romanization, but as many Romanizations as there were little traditions. The course which Romanization took depended decisively on the conditions that Rome found on the spot. If the little tradition, drawn as it was into the maelstrom of the great one, had little to counter in terms of complexity, authority and efficiency of the means of expression, then Romanization effected an almost total transformation of society, everyday life, aesthetics and symbols. Nothing remained as it had been. The inhabitants of Spain, North Africa, Gaul and, a little later, Britain, experienced this effect at first hand during the first two or three generations of the Roman Empire. A different reality presented itself in the eastern provinces. People had lived there for centuries, often even thousands of years, in complex symbolic universes – in urban societies which, as a matter of course, had at their command political institutions, written language, developed artistic forms, established forms of religious communication and a very pronounced cultural memory. This was most intensively developed in Egypt, which had become a Roman province in 30 BC. The gap in authority and prestige between the little local and the great imperial traditions here was at its weakest. In Egypt, the great tradition was almost unobtrusively integrated into the little one. This effect becomes perhaps most evident in the varying roles of the Roman

princeps viewed from the perspective of the Egyptians: in his role as a sovereign, he was a representative of the ancient Egyptian gods on earth; whether he was called Augustus, or Nero, he was portrayed, as a matter of course, as Pharaoh, had a Horus name, and his name was written with hieroglyphs inside a cartouche. In the imperial cult, which was also practiced in Egypt, he was worshipped according to the tradition of Hellenistic rulers, as *theos* ("God") and *sotēr* ("Saviour"). Finally, as a legislator and superior of the *praefectus Aegypti*, Egypt's governor, he was quintessentially the representative of the Roman Empire. No one found any contradictions between this variety of roles and the strongly divergent patterns of their representation.⁴⁷

Thus, the change induced by Romanization was felt to a varying degree, whereby the language border between Latin and Greek, which ran across the Balkans and east of Africa *proconsularis*, roughly divided a sphere of very strong (West) Romanization from a rather weaker (East) one. Yet there were also zones in the East in which the Roman influence was more markedly perceived. In general, border regions were particularly exposed to severe pressure of change, since the deployment of the Roman army here was particularly dense, and, with the region often being their last garrison place, many veterans settled there. Unlike in many other parts of the Roman world, Romanization here was not the result of simple acculturation but, above all, of the influx of large amounts of people, who totally cherished Rome in their hearts. The Rome of the soldiers and veterans might have differed from that of a senator or *eques*, the Roman army was, nevertheless, everywhere the spearhead of Romanization. In regions like the Middle Euphrates and the Ḥābūr, or along the Danube frontier, in the middle of rather weakly Romanized regions, islands of a pronounced Roman identity emerged over longer periods of time. This effect was even more distinct in veteran colonies such as Berytus (Beirut), which gained a completely new imprint through a presumably almost complete population exchange.⁴⁸

There was a further effect produced by the cultural division of the Roman Empire into a Latin West and a Greek East: in the provinces of Spain, North Africa, Gaul, Britain, the Alpine region and the western Balkans, Romanization meant linguistic and cultural alignment with Rome and Italy. In the East, besides the military islands of Romanization, there was hardly any trace of it. The eastern half of the Mediterranean was either Greek or, since Alexander the Great, had undergone a process of Hellenization, largely similar to that of Romanization. Hellenization had also been, as noted,⁴⁹ the result of acculturation and population displacements. Like Romanization, it also produced dialectical effects, by creating a great tradition which entered into dialogue with local little traditions. Romanization now, in Asia Minor from 133 BC, in Syria from 64 BC, and in Egypt from 30 BC, continued Hellenization under changed political auspices. Much of what was, in the West, a visible manifestation of Romanization never reached the East, or if it did, only in a very diluted form: Latin as a communicative and administrative language, the amphitheatre with gladiatorial games and *venationes*, and the toga. Even Roman citizenship spread into the eastern half of the Empire much later and more slowly than in the West. The cult of the Roman emperor in the

East was no more than a direct continuation of Hellenistic ruler cults, obtaining with the Princeps in Rome merely a new reference point. In legal issues, where it might be assumed that clear lines were drawn everywhere, the situation in the East was anything but straightforward: the users of law freely crossed the boundaries between fundamentally different legal systems, which they also used in different languages. In this field as well, the trend went towards the universalization of Greco-Hellenistic norms – such as for the nomenclature of urban institutions or for the dating system based on the Seleucid Era.⁵⁰ Romanization in the East was often Hellenization under the Roman flag.

Even if the concept of Romanization is to be maintained, its significance has changed fundamentally since the days of Mommsen and Haverfield. The clear contours separating different “cultures” have dissolved, just as the presumed one-sidedness of receptivity has. Scholars no longer take Romanization for assimilation to a given system of norms, but rather for a multilayered process of giving and taking, of negotiating and influencing each other, as well as of reciprocally interfusing traditions. In this view, Romanization loses its unequivocal quality and, at the same time, the predictability of its effects. It may take place in all possible directions, occasionally taking strange twists and turns. Sometimes, Romanization is the indispensable prerequisite for the rise of local identities. For an understanding of Palmyra’s Romanization process, this dialectic must be kept in mind.

Horizons of identity: city and tribe

The ambiguity of Romanization reflects in many respects the ambiguity of the political situation in the East. The structure of Roman power, with its various degrees of dependency and intensity of governance, does not allow the reconstruction of clear affiliations and boundary lines in the sands of the steppe. Indeed, compared to the Parthian Empire, the Roman Empire possessed a large core of directly administrated territory with fairly high intensity of governance: the provinces. Around them, however, there also lay a multitude of indirectly controlled territories and formations, from kingdoms to nomadic tribes. In spite of many clearly marked and fortified borders, like Hadrian’s Wall in Britain, or the frontier system in Germany, there was no demarcation line signalling the end of Roman power interests. Deep in central Europe, a network of personal dependencies was at work, which had been established by Roman diplomacy. This network reveals how Rome actually exercised control. Mapping the power relations in the Roman world requires the use of innumerable shades of the same hue.

Moreover, even in the directly administrated area of the provinces, rule was not undivided. The bulk of the political business was not dealt with by the emperor in Rome, but by the local administration. In the cities, or in their absence, in groups such as tribes, important decisions were taken: judgments were passed, laws were made, financial matters were ruled, civic cults were organized. The Roman Empire can therefore most probably be compared with a federal state, which, according to the principle of subsidiarity, delegates all decisions to the lowest

possible level. But even on a lower level, there was no equality for all: some cities had, in their quality as colonies of Roman citizens, *coloniae civium Romanorum*, a special status in terms of law and prestige; others were simple poleis or *civitates*. Other settlements, in spite of their respectable size, did not have the status of a city at all, belonging instead as a “village” to the territory of a city. What we know as the Roman Empire, was de facto a patchwork of thousands of communities with a huge variety in status. The strong position of the local communities did not make the Roman central government into a toothless tiger, it let the latter’s presence, however, be surprisingly little perceived by many subjects far and wide.

Therefore, there is no way of determining the point from which Palmyra belonged to the Roman Empire. The question has often been posed,⁵¹ but it is misleading. Whether a city was part of the Empire at a time *x*, cannot be decided on the basis of the uncertainties mentioned. Not even the affiliation of an area to a certain province can be readily explained. It is better to ask how Palmyra’s relations to the Roman world developed, how perceivable the imperial presence in the oasis was and, most importantly, to what *degree* the city belonged to the Roman Empire. It is plausible to assume that the ties intensified over the years. In the course of the first century AD, the presence of the Romans and their Empire became increasingly visible in the city and its surroundings. Yet the indisputable proof of an “annexation,” after which many are still searching, will not be found. Palmyra’s accession to the Roman Empire, and thus to the province of Syria, was a gradual process, whose progress corresponded to the logic of an open frontier.

Nevertheless, a considerable number of scholars consider Pliny the Elder’s account of AD 70, according to which Palmyra lay between the two empires of the Parthians and the Romans, but retained its independence from both,⁵² to be not only anachronistic, but outright wrong. The events of the year AD 19, when Germanicus visited Palmyra, are usually cited as proof for it.⁵³ The assumption of Palmyra’s “annexation” by Rome is substantiated by the following arguments: (1) the visit of Germanicus himself; (2) the dedication of honorific statues for the Emperor Tiberius, his son Drusus and his nephew Germanicus by the legate of the *legio X Fretensis*, Minucius Rufus, likewise in AD 19;⁵⁴ (3) a boundary stone, prompted by the Syrian governor Quintus Caecilius Metellus Creticus Silanus, which demarcated Palmyra’s territory from that of the city of Emesa;⁵⁵ (4) a fragmentary Greek and Palmyrene inscription from AD 19, which can only be deciphered in its Palmyrene part, stating that a Palmyrene named Alexandros had been sent by Germanicus to the king of Mesene (Charakene);⁵⁶ (5) a passage in the city’s tax legislation, adopted by the Council of Palmyra in AD 137, according to which the tax on animals for slaughter should be set in Roman denarii, “as Germanicus Caesar has made clear in his letter to Statilius, that taxes have to be calculated in Italic Asses.”⁵⁷

Not one of these testimonies indicates with certainty Palmyra’s annexation by Rome, nor its subordination to the jurisdiction of the governor of Syria. Germanicus must have stopped in Palmyra because of the strategic importance of the oasis. For this, it did not have to be part of any Roman province. Germanicus’ visit could very well be consistent with Palmyra’s status as a client state, or, as

Pliny asserts, a sovereign city between Rome and the Parthian Empire. Even if Palmyra had been a Parthian kingdom, this would not have ruled out the visit of a member of the dynasty ruling in Rome – it suffices to think of Antony's diplomatic initiative in Media Atropatene. For the same reason, a high-ranking Roman officer may have stayed in the city as well: the legate of *legio X* may have belonged to Germanicus' entourage, or even to an advance party preparing the prince's visit. The boundary stone is no evidence of Palmyra's being part of Roman Syria. At this time, Emesa was undoubtedly still an autonomous territory, and there is no reason why this should not have been true for Palmyra as well. After all, the boundary stone is proof enough that Palmyra's territory had a precisely defined border to the west. The fact that Germanicus sent a Palmyrene on a diplomatic mission to the court of Charakene, in the midst of the Parthian Empire, can definitely be used as an argument for the oasis city's neutrality. This Alexandros, with his conspicuously un-Palmyrene name, might possibly be the same person as the eponymous owner of a Palmyrene trading company in Spasinou Charax, the port city on the Persian Gulf.⁵⁸ In that case, Alexandros would have been the ideal candidate for such a mission.

The most serious argument for a relatively close linkage between Palmyra and the Roman Empire with its province of Syria, is the passage from the tax law. If the here-mentioned Statilius were really identical with Titus Statilius Hermes, who died in Palmyra in AD 56/57, then a Roman officeholder, the *imperator* Germanicus, gave a directive to a Roman citizen, resident in Palmyra. Unfortunately, we do not know how Statilius was employed in Palmyra, what official function he exercised and where he came from. Was he, as is presumed, a tax collector, a *publicanus*, like Gaius Virius Alcimius, who was buried with him? Very probably, Statilius did not come from Palmyra. So where did he come from? Many questions are open, but there is reason to believe that as a Roman citizen, he was involved with the levying of taxes, and that Germanicus ordered him to collect the money in Roman denarii. Sure enough, this does not necessarily make Palmyra the part of a province. In Jesus' time, numerous Roman *publicani* operated in Galilee as well; nevertheless the country was governed by the tetrarch Herod Antipas as a Roman client ruler.⁵⁹

In Palmyra, as in Galilee at the same time, the Romans pursued fiscal interests, so much seems clear. Is this enough to banish Pliny's description of Palmyra into the realm of fables? It should be certain that Rome's engagement in the Syrian Desert reached its first peak during Germanicus' visit. More precisely, the Romans appear (from our perspective) quite suddenly in the oasis, and they obviously attach considerable importance to it. Rome's sudden interest in Palmyra fits into the other activities evolving under Tiberius, between the Mediterranean and the Euphrates. In AD 17 king Antiochos III of Kommagene passed away, and his kingdom was annexed to the province of Syria. In the same year, Archelaos of Cappadocia died of his own hand, after he had been tried in Rome. Cappadocia became a Roman province. The early years of Tiberius' rule, therefore, mark a turning point towards a higher intensity of governance and more direct control. This is the first major realignment of Roman policy in the Near East since the days of Pompey.⁶⁰

This assessment could very well match Pliny's statement made in AD 70, that Palmyra lies between the empires. While on the northern edge of their Syrian bridgehead the Romans turned indirect into direct rule, in the east and south-east direction, they extended their influence to previously unknown or disregarded areas. They were bound to take notice of the Shāmīya, and with it, of the prosperous oasis settlement of Palmyra, which held the key to controlling the surrounding steppe. From the Palmyrene point of view, the approach of the western superpower offered more advantages than disadvantages. The Roman Mediterranean was a large market, and it was supplied by Palmyra. If their relations intensified, the better for the Palmyrenes. Even if, in exchange, the Emperor stretched out his hand, and tax collectors from the West settled down in the city, the price for more security and better access to the market was certainly not too high. Palmyra still lay between the empires; the scales, however, began to lean in Rome's favour. Those belonging to the political and economic elites in Palmyra may have welcomed their city's incipient ties to the West.

Statilius, if he really was Titus Statilius Hermes, was the first Roman citizen to have had his residence in Palmyra. Even if Statilius was not a Palmyrene – as the onomastics suggest – with him Roman citizenship had been introduced in Palmyra. Although in the first century AD the *civitas Romana* had already lost its importance as an entrance ticket to political participation, it was and remained a prestigious resource of the first order. Those, as the apostle Paul in the famous episode of the book of the Apostles, who could say of themselves that they were Roman citizens, enjoyed not only considerably more legal security compared to the others, but were also superior to them in the social hierarchy. Not by chance did Paul impress the tribune of the unit arresting him with the assertion that he was born a Roman citizen. The tribune was a Roman too, but he had payed to get it.⁶¹ Even outside the Roman world, the statement *civis Romanus sum* ("I am a Roman citizen") had a magical sound, as one no less than Cicero confirms.⁶²

But what had the Palmyrenes of those years to do with the concept of citizenship at all? Until about the time when Germanicus went to Palmyra, in the inscriptions there is no reference to any urban institutions. Instead, the tribe appears often as an organizational unit. The Palmyrene term for tribe is *phd*. The tribes are named after their – whether real or fictional, we do not know – ancestors. This is expressed as: *bny* ("the sons of") *x*.⁶³ The earliest epigraphic proof for a tribe is an inscription from the year 44 BC:⁶⁴

In the month of *tšry* [September / October] of the year 269 [Seleucid era], the priests of Bēl erected this statue for Garimay, son of Nabuzabad, who is from the tribe [*phd*] of the sons of Kahnebo [*bny khnbw*].

The inscription is equally instructive in two respects. First, it testifies that the Hellenistic practice⁶⁵ of erecting honorific statues with inscriptions in the public space in honour of deserving individuals was already established at this time in Palmyra. Second, the wording of the inscription deviates slightly, but in one crucial aspect, from the standard established in the Greek world. There, the

dēmos of the polis honours, at the request of certain individuals, deserving citizens. Here, it is the priests of the Temple of Bēl on whose initiative Garimay is honoured, whereas urban institutions do not appear at all. To what extent the Temple of Bēl, where the inscription was presumably put up, can be regarded as a "public space," is not certain.

The inscription illustrates how a social practice (the erection of statues in the honour of individuals) could be taken over by a society, without necessarily adopting the institutions (polis, *dēmos*) and concepts (public space), in which such a practice was embedded. If the honorific statues were a manifestation of "Hellenization," which cannot be doubted, then the selective approach with which the Palmyrenes picked at the symbolic and institutional building blocks of the Hellenistic world and its great tradition becomes evident.

The terminology giving expression to the affiliation to a tribe and to the role played by an individual in it, who is considered by the tribe members to be their common ancestor, is characteristic of many early societies preceding state formation. The collective memory there is based on genealogy; a person's identity is defined by the succession of their ancestors, who are very much alive in people's memories even after many generations. Many societies which have emerged from mobile groups possess such a genealogic memory, such as the Germanic tribes of the migratory period, or the Arabs at the initial phase of their conquests.⁶⁶ Genealogic recollection was deeply rooted in the Roman Republic as well: a good example is the role played by the ancestors of a large family, the *gens*, in a *pompa funebris*, the Roman funeral procession.⁶⁷ The *pompa* stripped the individual of his individuality and made him the representative of his ancestral line in every circumstance. It was not the individual who was celebrated, but the entire *gens*, which was thus merged into an identity group. Even the idea of a mythical ancestor (or an ancestress) of the *gens* was not unfamiliar to the Romans. For the Julians, the *gens* of Caesar and, by way of adoption, Augustus, this role was played by the goddess Venus, who had borne the hero Aeneas.

Among the Greeks, genealogical memory existed only in the realm of mythology, but not in political reality. Social divisions in archaic Greece, which suggest the existence of communities of kinship, the *genos* and the *phyle*, have actually developed only within the polis and do not precede it chronologically.⁶⁸ The democratic polis of Athens, with its deliberately artificial subdivisions laid down in the constitution of Cleisthenes, was actually organized in a downright anti-genealogic manner.⁶⁹ No one would have dreamed of thinking of one of Cleisthenes' *phylai* as a community of shared descent. It was no different in the Greek poleis of Asia Minor and the Near East. The orator Libanios from Antioch, who lived in late antiquity, reports on the division of his hometown's *dēmos* into 18 *phylai* by the founding act of Seleukos Nikator.⁷⁰

The term "tribe" therefore can have very different meanings.⁷¹ According to how the Palmyrenes used it in 44 BC, however, it seems very probable that the term *phd* indicated traditional communities of kinship, which are characteristic of nomadic groups. This is no surprise: the tempestuous urbanization of the oasis, which stands out in the material record of the late first century BC and then

clearly accelerates from the early first century AD onwards, can only be plausibly explained by the fact that emerging Palmyra had become the target of immigration to a considerable extent. Where did the people who settled in Palmyra come from? And how did they integrate into the nascent city? Some of the settlers may have come from afar. After all, Palmyra was already in the Hellenistic period in regular contact with Mesopotamia and, through Mesopotamia, probably with regions still further east. An indication as to the exotic origin of several Palmyrenes is given by onomastics. While the majority of the Palmyrenes had Aramaic names, many had a different linguistic background. A series of names are of Arabic origin, a few are unequivocally not Semitic, namely Iranian. Evidently, even some of the gods worshipped at Palmyra are of foreign origin: Ba'al-Šamen, the "Lord of Heaven," for example, was already worshipped as Ba'al-Hadad in the 'Bronze Age' Levant. He was also prominent in Iron-Age Phoenicia, especially in Tyre.⁷² In Palmyra, there is evidence of him being worshipped from the first century AD onwards. In the hinterland, he was popular as well, as is documented by Safaitic inscriptions.⁷³

One should not draw premature conclusions about what the names mean for the "ethnic" identity of the individuals in question, and for those who practised the cults. What is certain is only that the population of imperial Palmyra was anything but homogeneous. Evidently, already in early times, different languages were spoken and gods of different provenance were revered in the city.⁷⁴ How these people got along with each other and how their integration into the urban population worked, cannot be inferred from the sources. Were there, in Palmyra, ghettos on an ethnic basis, or even closed communities, made of people who lived linguistically, culturally and religiously in worlds which were too different to communicate with each other? It does not seem to be the case, for as early as AD 34, the members of a religious community (*bny marzḥ*) dedicated an altar to the gods 'Aglibōl and Malakbēl.⁷⁵ These people regularly came together for the cult of the two gods, one of which, 'Aglibōl, was a god of the moon, and the other – Malakbēl – was later identified with the Roman god Saturn.⁷⁶ The religious community of the *marzḥ*, however, was much more than that. An important part of social life took place in such fraternities. People dined and drank together, exchanged views and maintained social contacts. Seeing and being seen, the celebration of social status and material prosperity were at least as much part of the club life of the *marzḥ* as the performance of religious activities.⁷⁷ It is significant that in the inscription of AD 34, the mentioned names of the members of the *marzḥ* belong equally to men of Aramaic, as well as of Arabic descent. If the immigrants brought along ethnic identities to Palmyra, they seem to have blurred very quickly in the multicultural atmosphere of the oasis city. Palmyra was evidently a true melting pot, in which existing cultural differences, if not levelled, were at least quickly bridged.

However, identity attributions on an ethnic basis are not to be confused with the affiliation to real or fictitious communities of descent, as they appear to be found in the tribal structure of the city of Palmyra. This raises again the question about the demographic pool out of which the city grew. Even though many of the

Palmyrenes of the first century AD came from further afield, the majority of the inhabitants must have come from the close surroundings of the oasis. Only the inhabitants of the steppe can have populated the young settlement so quickly for it to experience the boom in the Augusto-Tiberian period. The overwhelming majority of these people were pastoralist nomads living on transhumance and being organized in tribes. A considerable portion of these nomads, may, on the sideline, have devoted themselves to farming the fields, as is often the case with pastoralists. In the wider area of the Palmyrene, there was no sedentary rural population sufficient for populating a city.

The evidence provides only patchy information about how sedentarism and integration into the urban society influenced the tribes' inner cohesion. Indeed, the inscriptions show that tribes were and remained an important factor in Palmyrene society. A remarkable continuity seems also to have existed among many of the tribes, which are known from inscriptions. The tribe of the *bn̄y kmr*, one of the well-attested tribes of the city, appears in a text for the first time in 32 BC and finally in AD 198.⁷⁸ The tribe of the *bn̄y m̄bw̄l* is continuously in evidence from as long as AD 9 to 279 and did thus still exist after Palmyra had been defeated by Aurelian.⁷⁹ The problem is that the texts only give us information about the existence of the tribes; regarding their social function and their perception by the Palmyrenes, they remain silent.

It is therefore legitimate to have a sideways look at recent processes of integration of nomads into urban societies. Such an operation can be observed, for example, in North East Africa, where the Beja ethnic group, attested since late antiquity, has long been under considerable pressure to settle. In Ethiopia and in Sudan, increasing numbers of Beja, who traditionally live in tents and practice transhumance as pastoralists, relocate to the rambling cities, where they boost the army of the poor. The traditionally strong tribal solidarity (*al-ʿaṣabīya*) gives way, in the new place of residence, to a stronger neighbourhood-related identity. The tribal structure of the Beja society therefore is in continuous dissolution: extended families and clans disintegrate, the tribe's imaginary community of kinship loses its binding power, contacts to the remaining nomadic relatives become less frequent, until they finally die out.⁸⁰

However, it takes longer than one generation for geography to replace kinship as a reference point of identity. And the process of becoming sedentary can only be comparable to that of urbanization up to a point. In the Beja's case, it is predominantly government authorities: extra-tribal forces imposing sedentarism upon the nomads. In Palmyra, on the other hand, the initiative must have lain with the tribes themselves. In the oasis, the tribesmen were not pushed into the role of an urban underclass; on the contrary, it was their elites who ruled over the city. Finally, there are several sub-recent and recent counter-examples for societies in which tribal identities remained intact, in spite of processes of sedentarization and urbanization. European travellers of as late as the twentieth century have reported of urban centres in south-western Iran, in which nomads from the surrounding countryside had settled down, preserving their tribal identities and keeping close contact with their mobile brothers in the steppe. Social polymorphism in modern

south-west Iran was in principle similar to the conditions in Mari in the Bronze Age: tribalism and urbanization do not have to be mutually exclusive.⁸¹

Certainly in Palmyra, new reference points of identity – residential districts, neighbourhoods, commercial associations, religious communities, finally the city with its citizens as a whole – were gradually added to the traditional, kinship ties. The earliest reference to the fact that the Palmyrenes regarded themselves as a community, is provided by an inscription from the year AD 10, which mentions a tax to be levied on camels brought into the city. Though the context cannot be reconstructed in full detail, the duty has to do with money belonging to the “people of Palmyra” (*gbl tdmry*).⁸² In AD 25, the same phrase appears in an inscription for a certain Malku, a member of the *bn̄y kmr*’, for whom the “people of Palmyra” (*gbl tdmry*’) erected a statue. The Greek version of the inscription expressly speaks of the “*dēmos* of the Palmyrenes” (Παλμυρηνῶν ὁ δῆμος).⁸³ A third and final time, *gbl tdmry*’ is mentioned in AD 51 in an honorific decree for Mokeimos (*mqymw*), son of Ogēlos (‘*gylw*’), who – like Malku before him – had generously donated for the construction of the Temple of Bēl. The seriously fragmentary Greek version this time translates as “the polis of the Palmyrenes” ([Παλμυρη] νῶν ἡ [π]ό[λις]).⁸⁴

What precisely this “people” of the Palmyrenes looked like, cannot be gathered from the inscriptions. It would be desirable to know how far the *dēmos* was institutionalized. And above all, it is unknown in which relation it stood to the tribes. It is certain, however, that, taken as a whole, the Palmyrenes possessed financial resources and, apparently, at least from AD 25, were capable of making certain decisions. Whether there was a people’s assembly of the type of a Greek polis, whose rights were clearly defined by law, might be doubted.⁸⁵ The “people,” though, acted as a community. It can be assumed that such a community at least partially rivalled with the long-established tribal identity. Presumably, the solidarity between urban and mobile tribal brothers was also put to the test by diverging lifestyles and partly different interests. The tribalism of the Palmyrene society, however, seems to have stood the test quite well. Unlike in the West of the Roman Empire, Spain, North Africa, Gaul and Britain, where the inhabitants of the new, totally Roman cities quickly stripped off their old tribal identity, becoming exclusively citizens of their cities, tribes in Palmyra during the first century AD were still not only an important factor to deal with, but the primary reference point for collective identity.

In the first quarter of the first century AD, Palmyra went through a rapid transformation. The city, which shortly before had lain outside the Roman sphere of interest, became a strategic partner for the Empire, playing a key role in the conceptual development of the Eastern provinces. For Palmyra, recognition by Rome was a veritable breakthrough, the importance of which is highlighted by the visit of the *imperator* Germanicus in AD 19. The visit served as a catalyst for the further intensification of relations as well. The oasis moved closer to the Roman world, the Roman governance, however, intensified and formalized itself only very gradually, so that there was no exact point in time when Palmyra “was annexed” to the Roman Empire and its province of Syria. In spite of the growing closeness

between Palmyra and the Empire, the oasis' urbanization followed a course which set it strikingly apart from the poleis of the Greek East, but also from the new cities of the Latin West. In contrast to them, genealogical thinking, imagined communities of kinship and tribal solidarity between nomads and city-dwellers were at the core of Palmyra's social life, however much the city would become the reference point of identity for its inhabitants. Palmyra was still a far cry from the idea of the "citizen" as a participant on the basis of equality before the law.

A man like Statilius, a Roman citizen and tax collector, who had taken up residence within the walls of Palmyra, even in his old age around the middle of the century, must have felt like a foreign body when he looked around himself at the society of the oasis. Everywhere, Roman power was based on cities, and Palmyra was now undoubtedly a city. The requirements made by Rome to its cities, however, were hardly met by Palmyra. The Palmyrenes may have referred to their city as a "polis" on several occasions. Yet Palmyra was no polis – and it was never truly to become one.

Notes

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- 7 Tac. 11,24,4: *manent posteri eorum nec amore in hanc patriam nobis concedunt. quid aliud exitio Lacedaemoniis et Atheniensibus fuit, quamquam armis pollerent, nisi quod victos pro alienigenis arcebant? at conditor nostri Romulus tantum sapientia valuit ut plerosque populos eodem die hostis, dein civis habuerit. advenae in nos regnaverunt: libertinorum filiis magistratus mandare non, ut plerique falluntur, repens, sed priori populo factitatum est.*
- 8 Henrik Mouritsen, *Italian Unification. A Study in Ancient and Modern Historiography*, vol. 70, Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies. Supplement (London: Institute of Classical Studies, 1998).
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- 10 Paul J. Kosmin, *The Land of the Elephant Kings. Space, Territory, and Ideology in the Seleucid Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), 93–119.
- 11 Paolo Desideri, “La romanizzazione dell’Impero,” in *L’impero mediterraneo. 2: I principi e il mondo*, ed. Guido Clemente, Filippo Coarelli and Emilio Gabba, Storia di Roma (Torino: Giulio Einaudi, 1991); Valerio Marotta, *La cittadinanza romana in età imperiale (secoli I–III d.C.). Una sintesi* (Torino: Giapichelli, 2009); Eckhard Meyer-Zwiffelhofer, “Bürger sein in den griechischen Städten des römischen Kaiserreiches,” in *Sinn (in) der Antike. Orientierungssysteme, Leitbilder und Wertkonzepte im Altertum*, ed. Karl-Joachim Hölkeskamp (Mainz: Philipp von Zabern, 2003); Vittinghoff, *Civitas Romana*.
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- 15 Verg. Aen. 1,279: *His ego nec metas rerum nec tempora pono; / imperium sine fine dedi.*
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- 19 Mommsen, *Römische Kaisergeschichte* (München: C. H. Beck, 1992), 75.
- 20 Francis Haverfield, *The Romanization of Roman Britain*, 4th ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1923), 14.

- 21 Ibid., “The definite and coherent culture of Rome took hold on uncivilized but intelligent provincials and planted in them the wish to learn its language and share its benefits.”
- 22 Ibid., 22: “First, Romanization extinguished the difference between Roman and provincial through all parts of the Empire but the east, alike in speech, in material culture, in political feeling and religion.”
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- 49 Above, p. 43–46.
- 50 Cf. Caroline Humfress, “Law’s empire. Roman universalism and legal practice,” in *New Frontiers. Law and Society in the Roman World*, ed. Paul J. de Plessis (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013); Maurice Sartre, *Le Haut-Empire romain. Les provinces de Méditerranée orientale d’Auguste aux Sévères, 31 av. J.–C. – 235 apr. J.–C.* *Nouvelle histoire de l’Antiquité*. Vol. 9 (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1997), 9, 57–59.
- 51 Most recently by Andrew M. Smith, *Roman Palmyra. Identity, Community, and State Formation* (New York: Clarendon Press, 2013), 24, and Annie Sartre and Maurice Sartre, *Palmyre. Vérités et légendes* (Paris: Perrin, 2016), 37. Cf. Hendrik Jan Willem Drijvers, “Daten zur Geschichte Palmyras,” in *Palmyra. Geschichte, Kunst und Kultur der syrischen Oasenstadt*, ed. Erwin Maria Ruprechtsberger, *Linzer Archäologische Forschungen* (Linz: Druck- und Verlagsanstalt Gutenberg, 1987), 120; Udo Hartmann, *Das palmyrenische Teilreich*. *Oriens et Occidens*. Vol. 2, (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 2001), 48–49. More cautiously however Jean-Pierre Rey-Coquais, “Syrie romaine, de Pompée à Diocletien,” *Journal of Roman Studies* 68 (1978): 51, and now in particular Peter M. Edwell, *Between Rome and Persia. The Middle Euphrates, Mesopotamia and Palmyra under Roman Control* (London: Routledge, 2008), 31–62.
- 52 Plin. nat. 5,88.
- 53 Most decidedly: Ernest Will, *Les Palmyréniens. La Venise des sables (I^{er} siècle avant – III^{ème} après J.–C.)* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1992), 40: “Ce point fu sans doute réglé définitivement lors de la présence de Germanicus et l’annexion de Palmyre par Rome dut être reconnue par les Parthes à cette date (19 de notre ère).” Cf. Sartre and Sartre, *Palmyre*, 37–38; Jean Starcky and Michał Gawlikowski, *Palmyre*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Librairie d’Amérique et d’Orient : Jean Maisonneuve, 1985), 37–40; Javier Teixidor, *Un port romain du désert, Palmyre, et son commerce d’Auguste à Caracalla*. *Semitica*. Vol. 34 (Paris: Librairie d’Amérique et d’Orient, 1984), 10; Jean-Baptiste Yon, *Les notables de Palmyre* (Beyrouth: Institut français d’archéologie du Proche-Orient, 2002), 1. Sceptical, on the other hand, Edwell *Between Rome and Persia*, 34–42; Gebhardt, *Imperiale Politik* 4, 35–36.
- 54 AE 1933, 204. The inscription is the oldest document in the Latin language yet known. Cf. Gebhardt, *Imperiale Politik*, 4, 35.
- 55 AE 1939, 179 = IGLS 5 2550. Cf. Edwell, *Between Rome and Persia*, 41–42; Gebhardt, *Imperiale Politik* 4, 34; Julia Hoffmann-Salz, *Die wirtschaftlichen Auswirkungen*

- der römischen Eroberung. *Vergleichende Untersuchungen der Provinzen Hispania Tarraconensis, Africa Proconsularis und Syria*. Historia Einzelschriften. Vol. 218 (Stuttgart: Steiner, 2011), 218, 396; John F. Matthews, "The tax law of Palmyra. Evidence for economic history in a city of the Roman east," *Journal of Roman Studies* 74 (1984): 162; Daniel Schlumberger, "Bornes frontières de la Palmyrène." *Syria* 20 (1939): 67–68. The boundary stone has been found at Qasr al-Heir, approximately 60 kilometres to the south-west of Palmyra.
- 56 PAT 2754 = Monika Schuol, *Die Charakene. Ein mesopotamisches Königreich in hellenistisch-parthischer Zeit*. (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 2000), 47–48.
- 57 PAT 0259 = CIS 3913, P102; G181. If the Statilius mentioned here is identical with a T. Statilius for whom, in AD 56/57, a tomb was built in Palmyra (SEG 48 1865), he was resident in Palmyra and died there, too. Cf. Hälid al-As'ad and Michał Gawlikowski, *The Inscriptions in the Museum of Palmyra* (Warszawa: University of Warsaw, 1997), 73; Kenneth Lönnqvist, "The tax law of Palmyra and the introduction of the Roman monetary system to Syria. A re-evaluation," in *Jebel Bishri in Context. Introduction to the Archaeological Studies and the Neighbourhood of Jebel Bishri in Central Syria. Proceedings of a Nordic Research Training Seminar in Syria, May 2004*, ed. Minna Lönnqvist. BAR International Series, 77. There is a complete lack of evidence concerning the official role of Statilius, his origin and ancestry.
- 58 Thus Schuol, *Die Charakene*, 47–48.
- 59 For instance Matthew, the τελώνης (*publicanus*) who was operating in Judea, was of Greek origin and probably a Roman citizen (*Matthew* 10:3).
- 60 Fergus Millar, *The Roman Near East. 31 BC–AD 337* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 52.
- 61 *Acts* 22:24–28: "[. . .] the tribune ordered that Paul be taken into the barracks. He directed that he be flogged and interrogated in order to find out why the people were shouting at him like this. As they stretched him out to flog him, Paul said to the centurion standing there, 'Is it legal for you to flog a Roman citizen who hasn't even been found guilty?' When the centurion heard this, he went to the tribune and reported it. 'What are you going to do?' he asked. 'This man is a Roman citizen.' The commander went to Paul and asked, 'Tell me, are you a Roman citizen?' 'Yes, I am,' he answered. Then the tribune said, 'I had to pay a lot of money for my citizenship.' 'But I was born a citizen,' Paul replied."
- 62 Cic. Ver. 2,5,146: "[. . .] quae saepe multis in ultimis terris opem inter barbaros et salutem tulit" ("[. . .] which still provided protection at the end of the world and even among barbarians").
- 63 The formula could also have been used for an actual father–son relation. Cf. Smith, *Roman Palmyra*, 37.
- 64 PAT 1524= Inv. 11 100; John F. Healey, *Aramaic Inscriptions and Documents of the Roman Period*, vol. 4, Textbook of Syrian semitic inscriptions (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2009), 144–45.
- 65 On this Markus Sehlmeier, *Stadtrömische Ehrenstatuen der republikanischen Zeit. Historizität und Kontext von Symbolen nobilitären Standesbewusstseins* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 1999), 151–52.
- 66 On the Germanic tribes using the example of the Goths: Herwig Wolfram, *Die Goten. Von den Anfängen bis zur Mitte des sechsten Jahrhunderts Entwurf einer historischen Ethnographie*, 3rd ed. (München: C. H. Beck, 1990), 41–46; on Muslim societies see the contributions to: *Genealogy and Knowledge in Muslim Societies. Understanding the Past*, ed. Sarah Bowen Savant and Helena de Felipe. Exploring Muslim contexts (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014).
- 67 Cf. Egon Flaig, *Ritualisierte Politik. Zeichen, Gesten und Herrschaft im Alten Rom* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 2003), 69–87.

- 68 Denis Roussel, *Tribu et cité. Études sur les groupes sociaux dans les cités grecques aux époques archaïque et classique* (Paris: Les Belles lettres, 1976); Karl-Wilhelm Welwei, "Ursprünge genossenschaftlicher Organisationsformen in der archaischen Polis," *Saeculum* 39 (1988).
- 69 Jochen Bleicken, *Die athenische Demokratie*, 4th ed. (Paderborn: Schöningh, 1995), 33–38.
- 70 Lib. or. 19.62. Josephus (Ant. Iud. 12.31; c. Ap. 2.4), on the other hand, informs us that all Jews who held the citizenship of Antioch were inscribed into the *phylē* of *Makedones*. Ethnic affiliation did indeed matter, at least in this case.
- 71 Similarly Sartre and Sartre, *Palmyre*, 41.
- 72 Michel Gras, Pierre Rouillard and Javier Teixidor, *L'univers Phénicien* (Paris: Les Editions Arthaud, 1989), 41–45.
- 73 PAT 0324; PAT 0297. Cf. Lucinda Dirven, (*The Palmyrenes of Dura-Europos. A Study of Religious Interaction in Roman Syria*. Leiden: Brill, 1999), 80, according to whom the god had been brought into the Palmyrene by "Arab" immigrants from western Syria. Sceptical however Ted Kaizer *The Religious Life of Palmyra. A Study of the Social Patterns of Worship in the Roman Period* (Stuttgart: Steiner, 2002), 56–57.
- 74 Sartre and Sartre, *Palmyre*, 27–32; Javier Teixidor, *The Pantheon of Palmyra*, vol. 79, *Etudes préliminaires aux religions orientales dans l'Empire romain* (Leiden: Brill, 1979), 64–71; Yon, *Les notables de Palmyre*, 59–60.
- 75 PAT 0326. Cf. Kaizer *Religious Life*, 133; Smith, *Roman Palmyra*, 67; Teixidor, *Pantheon*, 79, 40.
- 76 Kaizer, *Religious Life*, 73; on the cultic associations which were likewise called *marzh* in other societies in the Levant, especially in Bronze Age Ugarit and in Phoenicia: Erich Kistler, *Die "Opferrinne-Zeremonie." Bankettideologie am Grab, Orientalisierung und Formierung einer Adelsgesellschaft in Athen* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 1998), 129–31. On the *marzh*'s function as a professional association below, p. 201.
- 77 Kaizer, *Religious Life*, 73.
- 78 PAT 1063.
- 79 Yon, *Les notables de Palmyre*, 251–52.
- 80 Cf. Musa Muhammad Omar, *Die Sesshaftwerdung der Beja-Nomaden in Nordost-Afrika. Studien zu sozio-ökonomischen, politischen und kulturellen Veränderungen bei den Beja-Stämmen in Nordost-Afrika* (Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Berlin, 2008), 88–90.
- 81 Above, p.23. The social polymorphism in south-western Iran is described by Michael B. Rowton, "'Dimorphic structure and the tribal elite,'" in *Al-Bahit. Festschrift Joseph Henninger zum 70. Geburtstag*, ed. Franz Josef Thiel, 222–26.
- 82 PAT 2636. Cf. Smith, *Roman Palmyra*, 57.
- 83 PAT 1353.
- 84 PAT 0269.
- 85 Thus convincingly Smith, *Roman Palmyra*, 57–58.

6 Palmyra's war and peace

Palmyra's rise to the rank of a city and to Rome's partner in the complicated political landscape of the steppe frontier marks the beginning of two centuries, during which the initiative between the Mediterranean and the Tigris lay mostly in the hands of Rome. Between Augustus and Septimius Severus, the Empire expanded far beyond the borders of the province Syria, as it had been established by Pompey. Eastern Asia Minor, the western bend of the Euphrates, the Jazīra, the north of the Arabian Peninsula and finally Babylonia itself became aims of conquest for the Roman emperors, for whose seizure they more than once set in motion the formidable military machine of their Empire. The first two centuries after the beginning of the Common Era were also the period of Palmyra's rise to the rank of superpower in intercontinental long-distant trade. Since Germanicus' visit to the oasis, the fates of Palmyra and Rome had been closely intertwined with each other, even though the Syrian city remained at all times an autonomous player. Reason enough then to examine more closely Rome's stratigraphy of power in the Near East and Palmyra's role in it.

Trial and error: Rome's stratigraphy of power in the Near East

The political map drawn by Pompey on the desert sand in 64 BC, would enjoy an astonishing continuity. Syria remained the province from which the Roman governors remotely controlled monarchs and tetrarchs of territories dependent on Rome: great ones, like the kings of Commagene and Judea, and of the Nabataeans; small ones, like the lords of Emesa; and tiny ones, like the ministate rulers of Chalkis in Lebanon, Arca and Abila.¹ For Pompey, these men had been inevitable allies in Rome's effort to integrate the remnants of the disintegrated Seleucid Empire into the Roman rule. Pragmatically, the general had sacrificed intensity in favour of viability. Only by indirect rule could the enforcement costs be limited to a tolerable degree. In part, tangible conflicts of interest may also have played a role. Ptolemaios, son of Mannaïos and ruler of the tiny tetrarchy of the Ituraeans in the Bekaa Valley, is said to have personally given Pompey the colossal sum of 1,000 talents. In return, the Ituraean was not removed from his throne.²

Indispensable as they were, Roman client rulers enjoyed far-reaching privileges, considerable prestige and a surprisingly wide scope of political decision

making, with possibilities for influence right into Roman domestic politics. Many of the *reges amici*, on whom Rome counted, could barely cope. One of them, however, was a full-blooded politician who perfectly embodied all the virtues of a client ruler. Herod, who after first backing the wrong horse, Antony, recognized in time his fault and shifted to Octavian in the civil war. He was the smartest of the Levantine rulers and a true survival artist.³ With a mixture of terror and goodwill, he kept his notoriously rebellious kingdom calm, and proved to be a reliable supporter of the Roman ruling system in the eastern Mediterranean. Nevertheless, it was precisely in Judea where the limits of the system implemented by Pompey showed themselves. Not everyone who came to the throne of a client kingdom through dynastic successions was really up to the task. Herod died in 4 BC, and true to the terms of his will, his sons Herod Archelaos, Herod Antipas and Herod Philippus succeeded him on the throne. As ethnarch of Judea and Samaria, with the great cities of Jerusalem and Caesarea, Archelaos had inherited the lion's share of the Herodian kingdom, but he proved to be so incompetent, and was so unpopular among the Jews, that as early as AD 6, after only nine years in office, Augustus sent him to early retirement, placing his districts under the administration of a Roman prefect. The latter was personally appointed by the emperor and was responsible to the governor of Syria.

The annexation of Judea and Samaria was the first major territorial reshuffle in the region since Pompey. This solution, however, which was also, like the death of Herod, accompanied by severe unrest, proved unsatisfactory in the long run. The prefects were not quite adequate to the task, and the provinces were constantly upset by revolts. This is probably why, in AD 41, Claudius decided to make Agrippa I, Herod's grandson who had been brought up in Rome, ruler of the restored client kingdom of Judea. However, he also proved to be a blatant flop. Although the situation in Judea calmed down, Agrippa was, at least for the taste of Syria's governor Gaius Vibius Masius, on rather too affectionate terms with the other client rulers of the region. In AD 42 he invited them, without informing Masius, to his residence at Tiberias for diplomatic consultations. What is more, he took steps, also to Masius' great displeasure, towards fortifying his capital, Jerusalem. For the Romans, both actions went much too far. A client king had to keep close ties with Rome. Establishing local networks harboured enormous dangers for the central power, and that was true for the fortification of Jerusalem too. As it would become clear later on, city walls and defences could become a serious problem for the occupying power in times of conflict.⁴

Before the relationship with Rome could further deteriorate, Agrippa I died in AD 44. He left a still minor son, Agrippa II. He was also brought up in Rome, but was initially too young to take over the government's affairs. That is why Rome returned to the provincial rule of the year AD 6. Judea was now administered by a procurator, who, as the prefect before him had been, was subordinated to the governor of Syria. Thus the status of Judea had changed for the third time within only 40 years: from indirect to direct rule in AD 6, from direct to indirect rule in AD 41, and back again from indirect to direct rule only three years later. Keeping control over the restless province was too much for Rome, and this became apparent

a little later, when new insurrections shook Judea. Due to mismanagement and misunderstandings, large sections of the population had become radicalized and led a tough guerrilla battle against the Roman garrisons. The local posts were only seldom able to cope with the task. The procurators were busy filling their own pockets, deliberately ignoring the Jews' religious objections against the boastful manner of the occupation power. Thus, a spiral of violence and counter-violence was set in motion, which eventually, in AD 66, led to the first Jewish revolt, at the end of which the destruction of the Second Temple and the diaspora, the dispersion of Jews into the Empire, followed suit.

Judea cannot be representative of the many difficulties which Rome had to deal with in the East. The closely interwoven mixture of injuries, religious fundamentalism and Chiliastic expectations of divine salvation, brought about by Jewish monotheism, as well as by the three grand narratives offered by Rome, was too specific. Rome's reaction, however, was typical. It hardly knew any other recipes besides trial and error to master the various crises shaking the Holy Land. The Mediterranean hegemonic power was not able to compensate for contingent factors such as the political instinct of governors (which they often lacked) or the mortality of local rulers with a coherent political line. The emperors from Augustus to Caracalla did not follow a "grand strategy"⁵ on the eastern periphery of their Empire, but at most a strategy of muddling through. There were two imperatives, which they had to take into account, and which influenced their actions in opposite directions. On the one hand, an annexationist course, which provided Rome with new provinces, was always more popular on the Tiber than the pragmatism of the informal empire, which relied on client rulers as administrators of Roman power, leaving the distant frontiers of the Roman world largely to themselves. Glory was an eminently important currency for all those who meant something in Rome, and a politician who was able to increase the number of provinces, thus making the Empire grow, could be sure of the applause of the senators. Mark Antony had already experienced this first hand, when in the 30s BC he had shown his preference for indirect rule instead of blind annexation, and for this had been denounced by Octavian before the Romans. When he was emperor, Augustus let himself be amply celebrated for having imposed Rome's will to distant peoples.⁶ Universalism, which suited the idea of the Roman Empire, put the emperors permanently under pressure to close the gap between Rome's proclaimed mission of world domination and the Empire's factual limits.⁷ Politically, it was only too opportune to depose a client king and make his territory a Roman province, or to incorporate it into a province. Conversely, if an emperor relinquished provinces which had once been conquered, he had to be aware that he was playing with fire. Hadrian (AD 117–138) underwent volleys of criticism when, after the death of his predecessor Trajan (AD 98–117), he withdrew from Mesopotamia, which his predecessor had torn from the Parthians.⁸

Of course Hadrian had only bent in the face of hard realities. The large territories conquered by Trajan in the East could not be held by the Romans. The *optimus princeps*, as he liked to be called, had snatched all of Mesopotamia from the Parthians. But the Roman troops were much too weak, the supply lines far too

long to be able to effectively control and secure the conquest.⁹ Hadrian drew the consequences from the muddled situation and sacrificed the territorial conquests of his predecessor. The military and economic resources of the Empire were limited. Overstretching them meant exposing Rome to the risk of catastrophic defeats. Therefore, in the Near East, as in other frontier areas of the Roman world, it was indispensable to rely on local dynasts as mediators of imperial rule.

The two constraints, which were in competition with each other and which influenced every Roman emperor – Rome's manifest destiny as a universal empire and the factual limitations of its resources – created a tension which made the political actions of the world power appear erratic and contradictory. History's vicissitudes had to be reckoned with as well: the emperor Claudius' percipience that a local ruler would have better control of the situation in Judea than Roman prefects or procurators could, was useless if that ruler suddenly died, like Agrippa I did in AD 44. In this situation, the emperor had to change the course of his policy, forced by developments outside his power.

Annexations: Syria and the client states from Tiberius to the Flavians

The same incoherent attitude is characteristic of the Roman policy towards other client monarchies as well. In AD 17 emperor Tiberius had annexed the Kingdom of Commagene between the Euphrates and the Taurus, after its king Antiochos III had died. According to Tacitus, after the monarch's death there was unrest in Commagene. While the broad masses advocated the preservation of the monarchy, the aristocracy favoured the connection with Rome. The circumstances were the same as in Cappadocia, where king Archelaos, who had been enthroned by Antony, also died in AD 17. Tiberius made Cappadocia a province and attached Commagene to Syria. In AD 38, however, Caligula thought of a better one, restoring the kingdom of Commagene and extending it with parts of Cilicia, so that it had access to the Mediterranean. Caligula went so far as to reimburse the new – and last – king Antiochos IV the entire revenue from his kingdom, which had accrued between AD 17 and 38.¹⁰ Another u-turn was performed after Syria's governor Lucius Iunius Caesennius Paetus had accused Antiochos of conspiring with the Parthians against Rome (AD 72). Paetus felt challenged to a brief campaign against Antiochos, and the emperor Vespasian finally revoked the kingdom. Commagene was added to the province of Syria.¹¹

It was presumably under the Flavians that the last still autonomous client state west of the Euphrates disappeared: probably Domitian got rid of the dynasty of the Sampsigeramids, who ruled in Emesa. The family had apparently led the Emeseni as far back as when the still nomadic tribe settled down in the area of Arethusa and Emesa on the central Orontes. Under Antony, the dynasty had just stepped out of darkness, when the triumvir had accused the prince Iamblichos of treason, and had him replaced by Alexandros, his brother.¹² Octavian had this Iamblichos executed in 31 BC and totally ousted the Sampsigeramids for more than a decade before restoring the principality in 20 BC, installing another Iamblichos as a

client ruler over Emesa.¹³ Under this Iamblichos II (until AD 14) and his successor Sampsigeramos II (AD 14–48), Emesa reached considerable prosperity in the wake of the expanding Palmyrene long-distance trade. Although there is nothing left of the city itself, two funerary masks made of solid gold found in the necropolis reveal the wealth of the Orontes city and its upper classes.

Sampsigeramos II committed the capital mistake of taking part in the meeting of the Near Eastern princes, hosted by Agrippa II. This made him suspicious in the eyes of the Romans, who replaced him with his son Azizos.¹⁴ Azizos himself was related by marriage to the Herodian house. He had married Drusilla, a sister of Agrippa II, and had even been circumcised according to Jewish custom.¹⁵ The dynastic link was only one among many that intertwined the ruling houses of the Near Eastern client states, whose exact details for us remain obscure.¹⁶ The marriage between Azizos and Drusilla, however, was not meant to last. She separated from the leader of the Emeseni, soon afterwards marrying the procurator Felix, of whom the sources paint a very negative image, and with whom she had a son, Agrippa. Drusilla and her son perished during the eruption of the Vesuvius in AD 79.¹⁷ After Azizos' premature death around 54 AD, he was followed in Emesa by his brother Sohaimos, who received from Nero sovereignty over Sophene, a territory bordering on Armenia, and which was thus integrated into the Roman client-states system as well. With this, the Sampsigeramids had finally reached the first league of Roman client rulers in the Near East. Their familial network was widespread, and two sanctuaries of cross-regional importance were directly or indirectly under their control: the temple of the mountain god, mutated to the sun god, Elagabalus in their native Emesa, and the even more important sanctuary of Iuppiter Heliopolitanus in nearby Baalbek, which though being a Roman colony since about the turn of the century, seems to have maintained very close relations with Emesa's dynasty.¹⁸

Sohaimos is last attested as ruler of Emesa in AD 72. As Flavius Josephus informs us, he participated in Paetus' campaign against Antiochos of Commagene.¹⁹ Although the first solid evidence for Emesa being controlled directly by Rome dates as late as the time of the emperor Antoninus Pius (AD 138–161),²⁰ the dynasty seems to have reached its end quite soon after AD 72. A tomb inscription of AD 78 records the name of a Roman citizen, Gaius Iulius Sampsigeramos, unquestionably a member of the ruling family, without mentioning any kind of royal kinship.²¹ Several boundary stones erected between the territories of Emesa and Palmyra in the mid-70s also suggest that at this time a reorganization of the area was underway.

In the Flavian period, therefore, the Near East had acquired a completely new layout (Figure 6.1). That is why Fergus Millar rightly speaks of “a new Near Eastern empire.”²² The region's stratigraphy of power had changed fundamentally. Instead of a patchwork of directly and indirectly ruled areas, the Roman province of Syria stretched from the Mediterranean to the western bend of the Euphrates. On the Euphrates, it bordered directly on Osroene, which was under the supremacy of the Parthian “King of Kings,” and in the north on Armenia, which was torn between Rome and the Parthian Empire. The buffer zone created

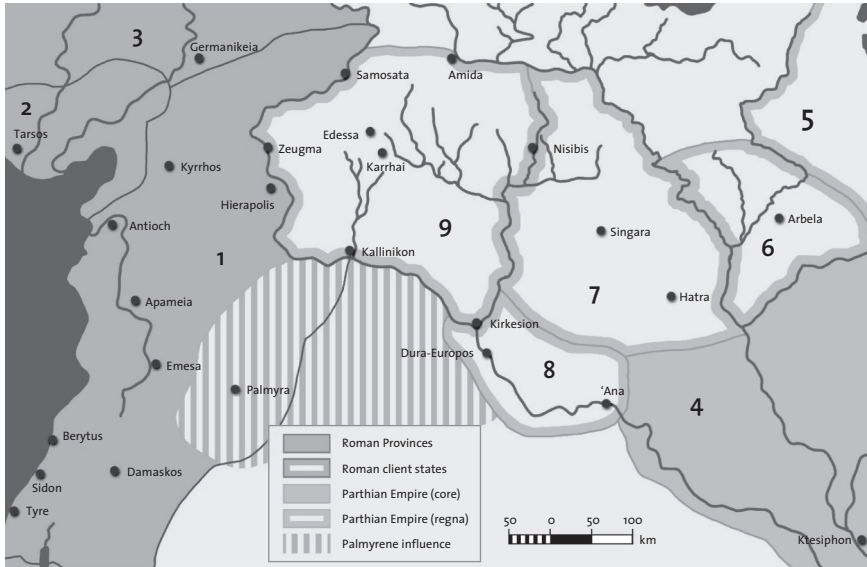


Figure 6.1 Syria-Mesopotamia, c. AD 80. Roman province of Syria (1), Roman province of Cilicia (2), Roman province of Cappadocia (3), Parthian Empire (4), Kingdom of Media Atropatene (5), Kingdom of Adiabene (6), Hatra (7), Mesopotamia-Parapotamia (8), Kingdom of Osroene (9)

by Pompey out of client states, which were remotely controlled by Syria, was now gone. Only the Nabataean Kingdom in present-day Jordan survived as an autonomous kingdom. To the south, Syria was bordered by the new *propraetorian* province of Iudaea, whose governor commanded a legion and six auxiliary units. The Euphrates frontier was also strongly fortified. The Cappadocian cities of Satala and Melitène, as well as Samosata in Commagene, each received a legion. In Zeugma, also in Commagene, the *legio IIII Scythica* took up quarters, being responsible for guarding the local bridge across the Euphrates. With this, four legions were on guard on the upper Euphrates.²³

It is totally unclear, however, how far Syria's, and with it Rome's, direct control extended from here to the south and south-east. Whether Rome controlled the right bank of the Euphrates up to the confluence of the river Balīh, or even further, up to the confluence of the Ḥābūr, remains a matter of conjecture,²⁴ since there is no evidence to support one or the other hypothesis. At this point, Palmyra's status is also at issue. Accepting Palmyra's annexation as early as the time of Germanicus, one obviously has to assume that at least the entire area between the Euphrates and the oasis of Tadmur was an integral part of the Roman province at the time of the Flavian emperors. Generally, the mention of two Syrian governors, Gnaeus Domitius Corbulo, in office from AD 60 to 63, and his successor Gaius Mucianus, in the "new" tax law from the year AD 137

is considered as evidence proving that the city belonged to the province.²⁵ The assumption of an affiliation to Syria is also based on a milestone, which was put up in AD 75 on a road which, it is assumed, led from Palmyra to Sura on the Euphrates.²⁶ The stone stood 27 kilometres east–north-east of Palmyra and belongs to a whole series of milestones bearing the name of the governor Marcus Ulpius Trajanus, father of the later emperor.

We do not even know whether the stone was found *in situ*, let alone whether it stood on a road belonging to the Roman military infrastructure in the hinterland of the Euphrates.²⁷ The stone is as useless as indication that Palmyra exercised a close control over the desert and its routes already during the Flavian period,²⁸ as it is as evidence for the proposition that Rome's rule at the Euphrates extended at least as far as Sura,²⁹ or that in Flavian times, Palmyra had been firmly integrated into the structure of the eastern provinces.³⁰ Besides, the mere mention of the governors Corbulo and Mucianus making disposals in the tax law does not support the conclusion that the two men also exercised the jurisdiction over Palmyra. There is hence no compelling argument to invalidate the statement of the contemporary Pliny, that Palmyra was situated at equidistance between the empires of the Parthians and the Romans.³¹ There is nothing to suggest that Pliny, well-informed in general, had anachronistically made use of an older source.³²

The milestones erected throughout the area by the elder Trajan, though, make one thing very clear: during the Flavian period, Rome invested significant amounts of money in the region's infrastructure. The boom in long-distance trade, which could be observed in Palmyra, may have played a part in it. The commitment, however, is based on a purely military logic. Due to the severe crisis of the Jewish revolt, the conflicts with the Parthians, and the fact that Roman client rulers had repeatedly shown themselves to be loose canons, the Romans had become aware of how precarious their rule over the Near East still was. The pattern of government, as it had been conceived by Pompey, with its coexistence of indirect and direct rule, had turned out to be not a solution, but part of the problem. The Flavians had learned from the mistakes of their precursors; obviously, now they were endeavouring to increase the intensity of Roman governance in the area. For this, soldiers were needed, whose presence was massively increased. The military needed accommodation and roads, the construction of which made rapid progress. Palmyra's status may still have been that of an autonomous city at the edge of the Roman world. Nevertheless, the time of the Flavian emperors after Germanicus' visit undoubtedly marks a further turning point in Palmyra's political history, by making the closeness of the Empire to the oasis more tangible.

Conflict-zone Euphrates: Corbulo and Trajan against the Parthians

The Syrian governor Gnaeus Domitius Corbulo, whose decree is immortalized in Palmyra's tax law, was also the main player on the Roman side of a conflict that shook the Near East just as much as the Jewish revolt did, and which might have also been one of the reasons why the Flavians changed the administrative structure

in Near East so radically, as they did from AD 70 onwards. The focal point of this war lay farther north, in Armenia, it showed nevertheless, just how the escalation in Judea did, how unstable Rome's stratigraphy of power actually was.

The war, which broke out between the Roman and Parthian Empires in AD 58, had a long prehistory.³³ The stumbling block was Armenia. The two empires had already been quarrelling for decades, each trying to gain supremacy over the mountainous kingdom in the east of Anatolia. The Armenian aristocracy was also split into a pro-Parthian and a pro-Roman camp, whose power-conscious representatives sometimes invited the Romans, and sometimes the Parthians, to intervene in inner-Armenian turmoils. In AD 42, Rome had put its candidate, a certain Mithradates, on the Armenian throne. He was overthrown a decade later by his own nephew Rhadamistos, which caused the Parthians to intervene militarily. They conquered the capital cities of Tigranokerta and Artaxata, enthroning Trdat I, brother of the Parthian king Vologaises I, and thus a member of the Arsacid ruling house as counter-king (AD 52). Armenia lapsed into a two-year civil war, from which Trdat, largely supported by the Armenian aristocracy, emerged victorious (AD 54).

The crisis was the first test for the principate of young Nero, who had just begun to rule. "Rome with its love of talking began to ask how a prince of scarce seventeen was to encounter and avert this tremendous peril," Tacitus notes, considering the threatening situation.³⁴ Nero sent one of his best men to the trouble spot, namely Corbulo, who had served in his first consulship in AD 39, and later had been a successful commander in Germania. Corbulo needed several years to prepare for the great confrontation with the Parthians – a clear indication that the defence alertness of the Roman military in the East was not at its best. The war, which was quite bitterly fought, lasted five long years, with victory moving back and forth, until the Parthians offered Corbulo a peace settlement (AD 63). Trdat laid down his diadem at the foot of a statue of Nero, and received it in Rome a few years later from the Emperor's hand. The symbolic act made him a client king of the Romans, but the status of Armenia, which was now ruled by an Arsacid secundogeniture, remained unresolved in the long run.

The war had shown two things. On the one hand, client monarchies tended to be unpredictable. If there were conflicting interests which got aligned with pressure-groups, then it was highly probable that before long both great powers would be drawn into such inner conflicts. If the said kingdom was strategically as significant as Armenia, then sooner or later a great war would break out over it. The Romano-Parthian war of AD 58 to 63, however, also shows that both empires were fundamentally able to compromise. Neither the Romans nor the Parthians could afford to waste their resources in protracted border-wars, especially since Rome had already the next conflict in store with the insurrection in Judea. The treaty of AD 63 initiated a period of about 50 years of peace.

Not until AD 114 did a new crisis escalate to a hot conflict between the two powers.³⁵ Once again, Armenia was a stumbling block. Here, some time at the beginning of the second century AD, the Parthian king Osroes I (about AD 89–128) had evicted the king established by Rome and replaced him with his own candidate.

With this, he had involuntarily provided the pretence for a large-scale campaign by Trajan. This had probably been planned for some time, regardless of the Armenian question. Cassius Dio, the historiographer from Bithynia, insinuates that the appointment of a new Armenian king by Osroes was merely a welcome pretext for the Roman emperor; "though his real reason was a desire to win renown."³⁶

In fact, the campaign which Trajan undertook in January AD 114, went beyond the scope of any border war. The emperor subdued Armenia in a true blitzkrieg,³⁷ then reached Nisibis, and moved on to pass the winter in the Osroenian capital of Edessa. In AD 115, the Roman troops conquered the cities of Singara and Hatra, then they pushed forward across the Tigris as far as Adiabene, the ancient heartland of the Assyrian Empire. The following year, with a surprise attack, the army conquered all of Mesopotamia as far as the Persian Gulf, including the Parthian metropolises Babylon, Selekeia on the Tigris and Ktesiphon. In the same year, further north, rebellions broke out, impelling Trajan and his generals to retreat. Trajan died in AD 217, and his not yet completed project of a Roman Mesopotamia was inherited by Hadrian. He did the only right thing and quickly evacuated all the remaining troops from there. With the Parthians he concluded a peace based on the status quo ante.

What Trajan had intended to do can be illustrated by a passage from Cassius Dio. The historian takes us to the Persian Gulf, where Trajan longingly looks after a ship sailing to India. The emperor knows that he will not reach the distant continent during his lifetime. "I should certainly have crossed over to the Indi, too, if I were still young," he says broodily, while Dio adds:

For he began to think about the Indi and was curious about their affairs, and he counted Alexander a lucky man. Yet he would declare that he himself had advanced farther than Alexander, and would so write to the Senate, although he was unable to preserve even the territory that he had subdued.³⁸

Whether real or made up, the story has certainly a true core: contrary to his predecessors, Trajan pursued ambitious goals in the East. As early as AD 106, he had annexed the last Roman client monarchy there, the Nabataean kingdom, transforming it into the province of Arabia. As far as the Parthian Empire was concerned, he undoubtedly had devised much further-reaching plans: Mesopotamia as far as the Persian Gulf should be Roman in the long run. That Trajan with his desire for conquest should choose Alexander as his model does not appear so far-fetched. Dio reports that he even offered a sacrifice to his spirit in Babylon.³⁹

The crew of the ship leaving in Trajan's presence, may well have consisted of Palmyrenes. After all, their trade route to India led, as will be seen, across the port of Spasinou Charax on the Persian Gulf, exactly in the region where Trajan was in AD 116. It has even been assumed that the Emperor started the war to subjugate Parthian Mesopotamia, in order to secure the vital lines of the trade with India for the Empire.⁴⁰ It has also been claimed that Trajan had made the kingdom of Mesene, with its capital Spasinou Charax in the extreme south of Mesopotamia, into a client state, and that the relationship of dependency outlived the retreat

ordered by Hadrian, leaving thereafter the seaport open to the Palmyrenes.⁴¹ Both of these assumptions can hardly be accepted. Such a “commercial policy,” making Mesopotamia’s conquest economically worthwhile in Trajan’s eyes, lay beyond the horizon of any Roman ruler. Like all emperors since Augustus, he was driven by the imperative to implement Virgil’s *imperium sine fine* in this world. The Palmyrenes certainly did not need a Roman client state for their commercial activities. They had come to terms with the Parthian Empire, and in AD 116 had already been travelling on the route across Mesopotamia and the Persian Gulf very successfully for many years.⁴² If, however, the episode mentioned by Dio were to be correct, then it would rather be proof that even troubled times could have had little effect on the trade with India. The flag did not follow the trade, but it did not hamper it either.

A distinguished visitor: Hadrian in Palmyra

Trajan died on 8 August AD 117 in the Cilician city of Selinus, which was then renamed Traianopolis. Close to him were only his wife Plotina and the praetorian prefect Attianus. Officially it was announced that on his deathbed, Trajan had adopted the 41-year-old former consul Publius Aelius Hadrianus, his protegee, who like himself came from Spain, entrusting him to be his successor (Figure 6.2). Already many contemporaries have questioned this version of events. The historian Cassius Dio suspects Plotina and Attianus to have faked the adoption.⁴³

Whatever the truth behind the adoption, Hadrian was now emperor, and he acted. His first package of political measures intended to withdraw the legions from Armenia and Mesopotamia, to abandon the territories conquered by Trajan, to drop the client king Parthaspates, installed by Rome in southern Mesopotamia, and to conclude peace with the Parthians on the basis of the *status quo ante*. In Rome, the supposed defeatism of the new *princeps* created bad blood. Four leading senators and the top of Trajan’s military leadership conspired against Hadrian, heads rolled, political porcelain was smashed.

Nevertheless, Hadrian’s course setting proved to be correct. The Emperor not only formulated a strategy for the Empire, which was radically different from the expansionist course of his predecessor; he was, perhaps, the first emperor to have a fully-fledged strategy and some sort of theoretical conception for the Empire he ruled. This concept had three cornerstones. First, to the philhellene Hadrian, true to his personal inclinations, Greek culture was the civilizing foundation of the Oikumene; for him, the cultural identity of Greece and of the Roman Empire had to be downright congruent, in order to function as such. Second, the Empire needed secure and physically clearly-defined borders. For this, military, fiscal and symbolic demarcation was necessary. The frontier system on the Rhine and the Danube was substantially upgraded under Hadrian, the northern border of Britain was fortified with Hadrian’s Wall. For the first time Rome was no longer an empire with shifting frontiers according to its military conquests, but a state confined by stable borders. Third, Hadrian saw himself as the supreme administrator of this state, for whom an intimate knowledge of the Roman dominion in all its diversity



Figure 6.2 Hadrian as ruler over the world. Sardonyx cameo, created originally c. AD 50, reworked AD 117–138. It is assumed that, originally, the emperor Claudius (41–54 n. Chr.) was represented, receiving a crown from the hand of a Nike. Hadrian was the first Roman emperor to visit Palmyra in AD 130. Berlin, Antikensammlung

was a *conditio sine qua non* for responsible governmental action. Therefore, the *princeps* entered history as the “travelling emperor,” who by tirelessly visiting province after province, literally “learned” his kingdom. Hadrian, without question, satisfied his personal curiosity. For him it was also a matter of helping to remedy abuses, as well as getting to know people, cities and cultures. Besides, through his travels, Hadrian experienced at first hand the growing economic, cultural and legal interconnection of the Mediterranean basin, which was dominated by Rome. On each arrival in a new province, Hadrian minted the respective *adventus* coins, so that his itinerary across the Empire can be reconstructed quite well. In a first great tour from AD 121 to 125, Hadrian visited Gaul, Germania Superior, Raetia, Noricum, Germania Inferior, Britain, Spain, the Mauretania Tingitana, Cyrenaica, Crete, Asia Minor, Cyprus, Antioch, Cappadocia, Bithynia et Pontus, Thrace, Athens and the rest of Greece, and Sicily; from 128 to 132 again Sicily, Africa, Numidia, Mauretania, Greece, Asia Minor, the Near East and Egypt. The very fact that the Emperor was able at all to travel to this extent, was symbolic enough that the Empire had found a high degree of inner cohesion.⁴⁴

In AD 130, the Emperor stayed in Judea and probably visited Jerusalem, which had been devastated two generations before in the Jewish revolt and had not been

rebuilt since. It is possible, but by no means certain, that the decision to rebuild Jerusalem not as a Jewish capital and temple city, but as a Roman colony, was taken here. From now on Jerusalem was to be called Aelia Capitolina and was to be consecrated to the Roman god Iuppiter Capitolinus.⁴⁵ There were many Jews who disagreed with this kind of re-foundation for their holy city. There were also rumours that the planned reconstruction of the old temple had been forbidden. The exact circumstances are unclear: two years after Hadrian's visit to Judea, however, a new great rebellion shook the province. The rebellion, which has gone down in history as the Bar-Kokhba revolt, after the name of its leader, lasted three years and could be suppressed by the Romans only with the deployment of enormous forces. The gaps that were torn by the insurrection into the ranks of the army, are still manifested decades later by military diplomas – the discharge documents of the legionaries who had been newly recruited to substitute those killed in action.⁴⁶ Roman rule over the southern Levant stood once again at the edge of an abyss, till the last flicker of the movement was suffocated in AD 135.

Even more important for Palmyra was another visit of the *princeps*: in AD 130, presumably before reaching Judea, Hadrian also visited the oasis of Tadmur.⁴⁷ The imperial visit to the emerging commercial city was certainly an important breakthrough in Palmyra's history, bringing many changes and giving expression to its growing prestige. Indeed, Palmyra had received Germanicus in AD 19, but he had only been a member of the Julio-Claudian dynasty, although a particularly prominent one. This time, however, the ruler of the Roman world himself dwelt within its walls, and the city made sure for him to be duly received. This can be gathered from a bilingual inscription set up in AD 130/131, honouring a certain Malēs (Mal') Agrippa, son of Iaraios (Yarḥai), son of Raaios (Ra'y), that he "during the stay of the god Hadrian supplied food for the strangers and the citizens, and organized a reception for the soldiers."⁴⁸

Already known for a long time,⁴⁹ the inscription offers a glimpse of Palmyra during Hadrian's rule, leaving, however, a number of questions unanswered. In the first place, the city visited by Hadrian, compared to the Palmyra of the early first century, appears to be a community in the advanced stage of institutionalization. Those honouring are referred to as the council (*boulē*) and the people (*dēmos*). There is also talk of citizens (*politeis*), who, in addition to the strangers (*xenoi*), have benefited from the provision of food by Malēs Agrippa. In addition, Malēs Agrippa is *grammateus* and thus probably a senior official of the city of Palmyra. Malēs already holds office for the second time. The function of *grammateus* is first mentioned in a bilingual inscription from the year AD 75, which was found at the Agora, and which honours a certain Zabdilas (Zabdila) for his generosity and for having accomplished his tasks righteously.⁵⁰ In the tax law (AD 137), an Alexandros is mentioned, who was the *grammateus* of the council (*boulē*) and of the people (*dēmos*).⁵¹ Another inscription from the Severan period, also found on the Agora, gives evidence of the function.⁵²

The office is thus well-documented for Palmyra. But what did a *grammateus* do? Was he a magistrate in the real sense? And how did one become *grammateus*? Whether the *grammateis* held an electoral office, and in what way the "secretary,"

as the Greek term usually is translated, qualified for it, is not revealed by the sources. A glance into the world of the Greek poleis in the Roman East can hardly help, because as an institution, the *grammateus* is very elusive. Since its emergence in late-classical Athens, the title has indicated a wide range of functions. In Athens, for example, it referred to the council's scribes, who drafted documents for public inscriptions; *grammateis* with all kinds of functions were also attached to magistrates and committees. In other cities of the Greek motherland, *grammateis* were in charge of various tasks.⁵³ There is evidence of the office of a *grammateus tou dē mou* in Ephesos, which clearly gave its holder great social prestige and also included rather extensive political powers. The *gerousia* in Ephesos also had a secretary, whose duties were the finances of the committee. In Antioch, finally, a functionary of the local Olympic games also held the title of *grammateus*.⁵⁴ The question of what a *grammateus* did in Palmyra, what status the holders of the office had and how they could acquire the function, cannot be answered on the grounds of the evidence; so it is a *non liquet*.

Still, around AD 130, Palmyra had a *dēmos* and a *boulē*, which could take resolutions. This, at any rate, is stated in the Malēs-Agrippa inscription. Urban institutions at this point had already been introduced for some time. The "city of the Palmyrenes"⁵⁵ appears for the first time in an inscription from AD 51 – a first indication that the Palmyrenes had begun to regard themselves as a community. This does not necessarily mean that the *dēmos* was already institutionalized as a general assembly at this time. It is also far from being an indication that the city had already constituted itself as a community of citizens. The first evidence for a *boulē* dates to AD 74, in the form of a trilingual inscription executed as *tabula ansata*, from the Temple of Bēl. The Greek version reads:

The *boulē* and the people honour Hairanēs, son of Bonneus, who is also called Rabbēlos, the fatherland-loving, who god-fearing decorated [the temple], in the month of Xandikos of the year 385.⁵⁶

In the Palmyrene version only the *bule* is mentioned, not the *dēmos*. The Latin text transcribes *boulē* as *bule* and translates *dēmos* – strictly speaking incorrectly – with *civitas*. The *boulē* was certainly an organ of the city, but we do not know how it was composed, what powers this circle had, and who had access to it. A chairman of the *boulē* is testified from AD 119, though we know nothing about his prerogatives.⁵⁷ From such isolated pieces of information it is quite plausible to infer that a crucial role in the process of Palmyra's institutionalization as a city was played by the Roman Empire, which precisely at this time was clearly increasing its presence there.⁵⁸ However, one should not overestimate the rather forced appropriation of a terminology borrowed from the Greeks. The Palmyrenes themselves were evidently not sure, which *dēmos* carried out the honouring of Hairanēs. Was it simply the inhabitants as a whole? Or was it rather an institutionalized assembly acting as a body of the polis? The hermeneutic problem raised by the inscription is that the terminology alone does not reveal the concepts behind it. This is a recurrent issue to deal with.⁵⁹

Although the meaning of the institutions for us lies mainly in the dark, the feeling of belonging together grew perceptibly among the oasis' inhabitants. From the middle of the first century, there is an increase in inscriptions concerning individuals or groups, who call themselves "Palmyrene." The city has thus become the point of reference for collective identity, although it has to compete for this role with other communities. In AD 64, the members of the tribe of the *bny m'zyn* set up a statue for their fellow tribesman Šalamalat, "the Palmyrene."⁶⁰ Šalamalat's identity is defined by three affiliations: to the family, expressed by filiation ("son of Yarhibōl', son of Nurbel"), to the tribe and to the city. It is striking that Šalamalat is explicitly referred to as "Palmyrene." After all, it is his fellow tribesmen who honour him. Apparently, Šalamalat's belonging to the group of the "Palmyrenes" is still worthy of being emphasized. Are his fellow tribesmen then not "Palmyrenes"?

Here the concept does not seem to have a political dimension. Rather, it designates the place of residence of a person or, perhaps, their ethnicity. The oldest inscription, though very fragmentarily preserved, in which "Palmyrenes" appear as a group, does not come from Palmyra, but from the Parthian Empire. In AD 19, "Palmyrene and Greek merchants"⁶¹ honoured a Palmyrene named Yedi'bel in Seleukeia on the Tigris, "because he earnestly sought to establish" the Temple of Bēl there. In this case, the terms "Palmyrenes" and "Greeks" probably refer to the speakers of these languages among the merchants plying their trade in the Parthian Empire. It is certainly no coincidence that the Palmyrenes first became aware of their ethnic identity far from their homeland, in the diaspora, and in close contact with other ethnic groups. As always, here, too, the effect of alterity, otherness, was a powerful catalyst of identity.⁶²

From here to a civic identity of the Palmyrenes, however, there was still some way to go, though perhaps not too far. In AD 84, half a century before Hadrian's visit, the *boulē* of Palmyra honoured "Abgaros ['Abgar,] son of Patroklos [P̄trqls], also called Asturga ['Asturg'], son of Lekeisos [Leqīšu]," with a statue for being "a good citizen."⁶³ So by now at the latest, in the Flavian period, the concept of citizenship had taken root in Palmyra. At least by name, Palmyra had become a polis, to which one could belong as a *politēs*, a citizen. Previously, being "Palmyrene" had meant no more than simply being part of a certain ethnic or language group; it now stated a formal, to a certain extent institutional, affiliation. One could be honoured for being a good citizen and "full of good will towards his own home city."⁶⁴ So, evidently, certain moral qualities were connected with citizenship.

That the Palmyrenes had begun to emulate, to a degree, the customs of a Greek polis, can also be inferred by their practice, throughout the first century AD, of honouring in public such characters who had made a contribution to the community. In the Greek cities of the Hellenistic world, the polis expected their wealthy citizens to put their economic power at the service of the community. They financed building projects and the preservation of public structures; they distributed grain, oil and other kinds of food to the populace; and they paid the costs of games and religious celebrations, which in the first place fomented the feeling of belonging to a community. Scholars have called the social practice of such institutionalized

generosity “*euergetism*,” after the Greek verb *euergetein*, meaning “doing good,” “being charitable.” The benefactor was by no means unselfish. He merely traded his money for another form of capital, which in all ancient societies was by far more valuable: honour.⁶⁵

Everywhere in the Hellenistic and the Roman world, the economic basis of *euergetism* was land property. As city-dwelling landowners, the benefactors drew income from their estates, consuming it, as prototypical members of a leisure class do, in the city.⁶⁶ For this reason, most of the ancient cities were “consumers’ cities” as described by Max Weber. Unlike its typological counterpart, the “producers’ city,” the consumers’ city does not generate its own livelihood. It exists because private or institutional landholders divert a considerable portion of the income yielded by their landed property, from the countryside to the city.⁶⁷ Classical *euergetism* thus allows the whole city to participate in the income of a leisure class of notables, who convert a part of their revenues from landed property into prestige and political influence. The dignitaries largely draw their legitimacy as political leaders from the social practice of *euergetism*.

That an analogous social practice had taken root in Palmyra in the first century AD, cannot be denied. As in Ephesos or Athens, statues and inscriptions were set up in particularly visible places for deserving citizens, who evidently commanded considerable financial resources. Unlike in the Greek cities, where only the council (*boulē*) and the people’s assembly (*dēmos*) authorized the honouring and provided the means to realize it by way of resolution, in Palmyra there were other communities as well, which could perform the honorification. The question is, whether in Palmyra, as in the rest of the Greek-speaking Oikumene, there was a leisure class of landed notables. This is seriously to be doubted, especially in view of the specific ecological conditions in the oasis.

So this was the city in which Hadrian entered in AD 130. Lots of things, like the practice of *euergetism* and the many honorific statues in the cityscape, as well as several buildings, must have been familiar to the philhellene in the imperial purple. Yet there were lots of other things too, which must have reminded him that the oasis and the desert surrounding it were a foreign world nonetheless. On the political level, it was above all the kinship ties, clan structures and tribes, which were still at the basis of the Palmyrene society, which must have seemed outlandish to the ruler of the Roman world – a world in which such bonds were of subordinate importance, or unknown altogether. Even the built environment was only at first glance the same as the one Hadrian knew from hundreds of other Roman cities.⁶⁸

However, just as a century before, Germanicus’ visit had coincided with an explosive development of the oasis metropolis, the AD 130s constituted a period of eruptive change. The emperor left Palmyra a prestigious souvenir straightaway: from now on, the town adorned itself with his name. In numerous official statements, the Syrian metropolis now appeared under the name *Hadrianē* Palmyra, indicating how high the city ranked among the *princeps*’ political priorities, and at the same time how deep were the marks left by the imperial visit in Palmyra’s commemorative culture.⁶⁹ Hadrian’s visit was probably only one of several factors

that pushed for change in Palmyra. Perhaps it was also as much a symptom of a restructuring that was already underway in the entire region, as a catalyst for this process. Roman citizenship had reached Palmyra comparatively late. Under the Flavians, no Palmyrene had held Roman citizenship. It was not until Trajan's time that individual Palmyrenes legally became Romans, for which the *nomen gentile* "Ulpus" give evidence. The most prominent of them, Marcus Ulpus Yarḥai, was honoured in the AD 150s by no less than eight caravan inscriptions and was one of the most powerful men of his city at that time. Another of these Trajan Romans, Marcus Ulpus 'Elabel, also belonged to an influential family and was presumably the oldest of four brothers who founded a tower tomb in the Valley of the Tombs at the beginning of the second century AD.⁷⁰ Under Hadrian, the number of Palmyrenes being awarded Roman citizenship distinctly increased, as it is shown by the large number of the testified Publii Aelii. More Palmyrenes entered now into the service of the Roman army. From Hadrian's time, there is evidence of several Palmyrene officers, who were mainly deployed in the Danube area: like a certain Publius Aelius Taīmē, who rose to the rank of duumvir in the Dacian city of Sarmizegetusa and commissioned the construction of a temple;⁷¹ or Marcus Acilius Alexander, who commanded a cohort in Moesia Inferior in AD 134;⁷² or Tiberius Claudius Philippus, who was honoured by his friend Marcus Ulpus Yarḥai with an inscription, presumably in the AD 150s, and who commanded the Roman *ala I Ulpia dromedariorum Palmyrenorum*, a cavalry unit equipped for desert fighting and garrisoned in Palmyra.⁷³ Maybe Philippus did not come from Palmyra, according to an inscription, however, he was a "citizen of the city of the Palmyrenes."

It is clear that Hadrian's withdrawal from Mesopotamia brought about a consolidation of the political map in the Near East. Along the Euphrates frontier, peace reigned for several decades. The Palmyrenes must have rejoiced at this development. Political stability was surely more beneficial for their trade than war was.

It is thus not surprising that the commercial activity of the oasis city in Mesopotamia made a distinctive upsurge from AD 130 onwards. This can be seen in the record of the so-called caravan inscriptions (Figure 6.3), whose frequency significantly increased in the AD 130s. With this category of inscriptions, which will be discussed elsewhere,⁷⁴ merchants active in the long-distant trade on the Mesopotamian route honoured men who helped them in their work. From the time between AD 130 and 163 – the year in which the next Romano–Parthian war broke out – a total of 17 inscriptions are known, which can be relatively safely dated. While from the much longer period between Germanicus' visit of AD 19 and the beginning of hostilities in Trajan's Parthian campaign of AD 114, only a total of seven inscriptions survive.⁷⁵

The inscription with the tax tariff, found in 1881, which in its second version dates to the year before Hadrian's death (AD 137), points in the same direction. John F. Matthews rightly called the document "one of the most important single items of evidence for the economic life of any part of the Roman Empire."⁷⁶ Although the tariff does not regulate taxes levied on long-distance trade commodities, but

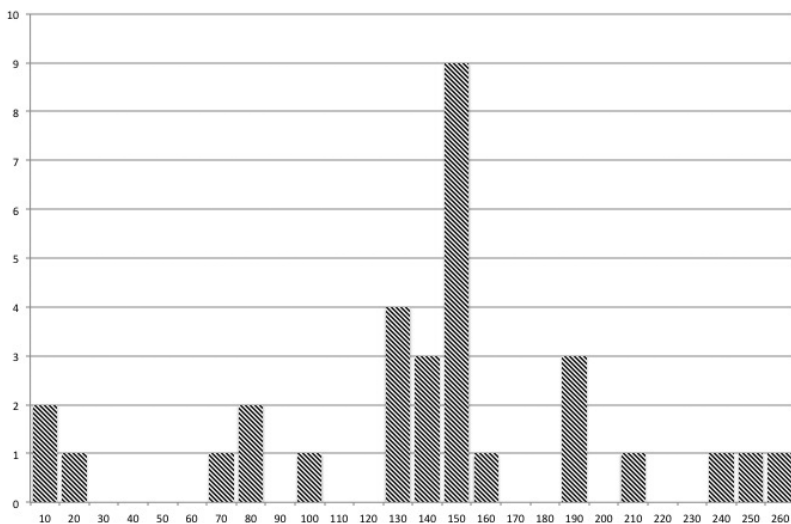


Figure 6.3 Dated caravan inscriptions ordered by decades. There is a significant cluster in the period between AD 130 and 160

duties payable on the local handling of goods on the Agora, mostly for common items of daily use (olive oil, lard, salt fish),⁷⁷ the text also lists many other goods which were brought to Palmyra from further afield, and which must be related to long-distance trade.⁷⁸ Such goods include slaves,⁷⁹ whose import was taxed with 22 denarii, ointment in alabaster vessels and goatskins,⁸⁰ bronze statues,⁸¹ purple textiles⁸² and, in the old version, Italic wool.⁸³ That in AD 137, as explained by the introductory text, a new version of the tariff was required, is justified by the fact that there was a need for regulation, since the duties on many goods had previously been determined by their provenance, which had often caused quarrels to arise between traders and tax collectors.⁸⁴ That in Hadrian's time taxation of many goods had become an acute problem, can only have been due to the fact that the volume of trade had increased.

Now this trade was at the centre of Rome's interests. This is suggested, in any case, by two bilingual inscriptions, which were put up in AD 132 and 145/146 respectively to honour a certain Šo'adu, who had repeatedly helped merchants in Vologesias and on their journey from there to Palmyra, and who at least once had saved them "from great danger."⁸⁵ The honours for Šo'adu were granted, as usual, at the request of the merchants, by the *boulē* and the *dēmos* of Palmyra, but the incidents in which Šo'adu had intervened with his help had been so significant, that imperial players took the initiative as well. In the first case, the honours were awarded by "order" (*epistolai*) and "arrangement" (*diatagma*) of the Syrian governor (*hypatikos*), "our distinguished ruler" Publicius Marcellus. The second inscription records as initiators of the honours, in addition to the

same governor, the emperors Hadrian and Antoninus Pius themselves, the “god Hadrian” (*theos Hadrianos*) and the “divine imperator” (*theiotatos Autokratōr*). Two honouring decrees for Roman officers, probably both not Palmyrenes, point in the same direction. The centurion (*hekatontarchos*) Iulius Maximus was honoured in AD 135 by the Palmyrene merchants of Spasinou Charax.⁸⁶ To the prefect (*eparchos*) Gaius Vibius Celer, a statue was erected in the Temple of Bēl in AD 150.⁸⁷ Both were honoured for having ensured the safety of the Palmyrene trade routes between the oasis and the Euphrates.⁸⁸ Palmyra had become so important to Rome that even the emperors were concerned about the smooth running of the caravan trade.

The Palmyrenes, in turn, took deep interest in the fate of the emperors. Šo‘adu, who was so amply honoured by the emperors and their governor, had “founded and consecrated an Augusti temple in Vologesias,”⁸⁹ as can be read in the Greek version of the second Šo‘adu inscription. The fact that a Palmyrene was able to dedicate a temple to the Roman imperial cult in the Parthian city of Vologesias, is highly significant of the complex triangle between the oasis city and the two empires. The AD 140s probably mark the height of Romano–Parthian détente in the second century AD. It is nevertheless unthinkable that other people from the West could have built such a sanctuary in a large Parthian city. The temple stands symbolically for the loyalty of the Palmyrenes to the emperor in Rome; it also stands for the immense opportunities which offered themselves to the Palmyrenes to the east of the Euphrates. In Vologesias, a Palmyrene diaspora community had been formed a long time previously, which lived according to their own customs, worshipped their own gods, had a dense network of relations with their homeland, and, indirectly, with the epicentre of Roman power: the imperial residence on the Palatine.

All this shows the dynamic change that Palmyra and its environment had experienced during the 20 years since Hadrian’s visit to the oasis. The integration into the province of Syria, which is scarcely documented up to Trajan’s Parthian campaign, had now made a recognizable leap forward. *Hadrianē* Palmyra moved in this period to the first league of Roman cities. Its elite acquired Roman citizenship. Palmyrenes pushed their way into the Roman army and made careers – in short, the inhabitants of the oasis made ingenious use of the opportunities which were offered to them by Rome. At the same time, though, they maintained sufficient autonomy to keep open the door to the Parthian Empire. In spite of all, Palmyra was no Roman city like any other.

Rome on the offensive: from Lucius Verus to Caracalla

The Romano–Parthian peace, which was a golden age for Palmyra, came to an abrupt end in the spring of AD 161, when, once again, the weapons of the two great empires spoke. A few months earlier, after having held the reins in Rome for 23 long years, Antoninus Pius had died in Lanuvium. In March 161, two men succeeded him: the almost 40-year-old Marcus Aurelius and the ten-years-younger Lucius Verus (Figure 6.4). Although both held the rank of Augustus and

both had already been designated by Hadrian for the succession, the leading role clearly belonged to Marcus.⁹⁰

Roman sources report that the Parthian king Vologaises IV (AD 147–191) wanted to benefit from the ruler change in the Roman Empire, to round off his territorial possessions. He had installed his kinsman Pakoros as king in Armenia, the eternal bone of contention between the empires, without consulting the Romans. The Roman response followed promptly, the governor of the province of Cappadocia, however, was defeated by the Parthians and committed suicide. A second hazard scenario was probably looming at the bend of the Euphrates, from where, in the worst case, the Parthians could have broken through as far as the Mediterranean.⁹¹ Marcus Aurelius sent his younger co-emperor to the East to counter the threat and to repulse the Parthians. Lucius Versus, if one is to believe the *Historia Augusta*, seems though to have travelled at a leisurely pace to the East, enjoying in full the amenities of various country estates offering him hospitality on the way.⁹²

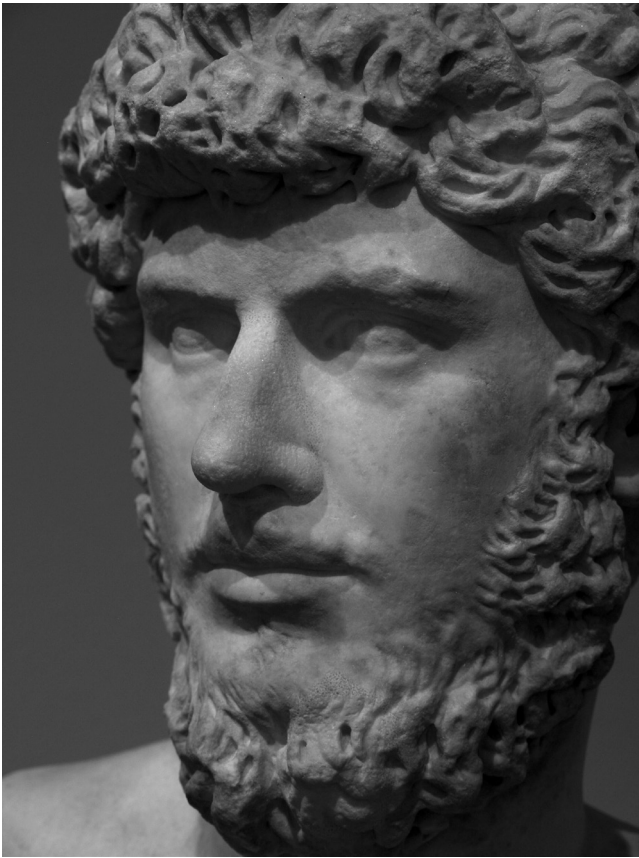


Figure 6.4 Bust of the emperor Lucius Verus, c. AD 160–170, Berlin, Antikensammlung

Upon reaching his headquarters in Antioch, he is said to have devoted himself entirely to a life of luxury, while his three lieutenants Statius Priscus, Avidius Cassius and Martius Verus, took over the operational warfare.⁹³ The reports which were written much later tend to be denunciatory in tone,⁹⁴ the Parthian campaign, however, seems to have been the subject of contemporary, almost hagiographical historiography as well. The author Lucian of Samosata (about AD 120–180) makes fun of such flattering effusions in his satire *How to Write History*: one of the many wannabe historians needed a whole book just to describe the emperor's shield; another one seems to have claimed that 70,236 Parthians were killed at Europos, but only two Romans; and a third one spins yarns over a city founded by the emperor in Mesopotamia. It is already densely populated, mocks Lucian, "with empty dreams and literary drivellings."⁹⁵

The military achievements, though, were quite impressive. As a matter of fact, merely the victor by-names adopted by Lucius Verus can produce a framework for the chronology of the conflict. In AD 163 he called himself *Armeniacus*: the kingdom was conquered, its capital Artaxata was occupied, and Pakoros was replaced by a king who was acceptable to the Romans. At the turn of the year AD 164/165, the emperor assumed the title of a *Parthicus Maximus*, after the Roman army had inflicted at least one defeat to the Parthians in Mesopotamia. Verus' teacher Fronto wrote in a letter to his pupil that Euphrates' fortresses Dausara (Qal'at Ja'bar) and Nikephorion (ar-Raqqa), like Artaxa, were conquered "under your guidance and under your command by force of arms."⁹⁶ In AD 166 the war was over, Rome had achieved significant territorial gains and had considerably improved its strategic position in the Near East.

For Palmyra and its long-distance trade, the war must have meant a severe setback. It is improbable that Palmyrene caravans could have passed unhindered through Parthian territory between AD 161 and 166. In fact, the last inscription for a long time to refer to Palmyrene trading activities in Mesopotamia, dates back to AD 161. It is dedicated to a *bouleutēs* of Antioch, who as a tax collector (*tetartōnēs*) had helped "merchants coming from Spasinou Charax."⁹⁷ Thus, while documents fall silent concerning the Mesopotamian trade, finds from the Upper-Egyptian towns of Dendera and Koptos on the Nile could indicate that the Palmyrenes were trying to open an alternative route for their trade. As early as in the Ptolemaic period, Palmyrenes had been active in Egypt. In the second half of the second century AD, the Palmyrene engagement in Egypt was apparently expanding at high speed. A Greek inscription from Koptos honours Zabdalas, son of Salmanos, who built propylaea, three stoai, and other buildings with his own money. The provenance of the ship owner (*nauklēros*) Zabdalas is given as "*Hadrianē* Palmyra." Those awarding honours call themselves his friends, "merchant associates, men from *Hadrianē* Palmyra."⁹⁸ The terminology leads to the conclusion that the Palmyrene ship owners and merchants in Koptos had organized themselves into an association. The inscription is not dated, but it certainly comes from the time after AD 130, presumably from the AD 150s or 160s. An inscription from nearby Dendera also mentions ship owners and merchants, who appear to be organized in associations as well. This inscription is also undated, it must come, anyway, from the period

after AD 160.⁹⁹ The chronological coincidence between the Palmyrene activities in Egypt on the one hand, and the Romano–Parthian war, as well as the suspension of caravan inscriptions from AD 161 on the other, is at least remarkable.

Particularly dramatic events seem to have shaken the Parthian *regnum* of Osrhoene in the bend of the Euphrates. In the early AD 120s, Ma‘nu VII bar Izat came to power in its capital, as a local dynast under the suzerainty of Ktesiphon. Eventually, his son, who was also called Ma‘nu, succeeded him. At some point, one of the two Ma‘nus minted coins with the Greek legend ΒΑΣΙΛΕΥΣ ΜΑΝΝΟΣ ΦΙΛΟΡΟΜΑΙ[ος] – “King Mannos, friend of Romans.” Put under pressure by the Romans’ success, maybe merely by the approach of Verus’ army, this Ma‘nu is most likely to have changed sides. He had backed the right horse, albeit too early. The Parthian king Vologaisēs responded immediately and replaced him with a certain Wā‘el. According to the chronicle of Zuqnin, a world chronicle dating back to the eighth century and written in Syriac, this happened around AD 163. According to the chronicle, Wā‘el ruled for two years before being substituted again by a Ma‘nu, either father or son, who in the meantime had escaped into Roman territory. From then on, he ruled as a Roman client king over Osrhoene.¹⁰⁰ The turbulences in the Kingdom of Osrhoene indicate how critical the position of small kings along the steppe frontier was in case of conflict. In order to show the correct loyalty at the right moment, they needed information, which was not easy to obtain. Frequently the fog of war misled them into taking imprudent decisions. Ma‘nu the “friend of Romans” had a lucky escape: he was able to get behind the Roman lines in time. Nowhere near every client ruler had this kind of luck.

Especially with Osrhoene’s transition under Roman suzerainty, the principle of graduated intensity of governance between direct and indirect rule, which had disappeared with Trajan and the demise of the Nabataean Kingdom, was revived in the Near East. In this way, Rome only returned to models that had been tried and tested in the past. The rigid Euphrates border had once again become a shifting frontier of conquest. A more creative policy was applied concerning the southern part of upper Mesopotamia, which had been vacated by the Parthians. Here was the city of Dura-Europos, a fortress which had already been founded as a Greek polis in a strategic location by Seleukos Nikator, not far from the confluence of Ḥābūr with the Euphrates and, as it were, at the join between the northern part of the land between the two rivers, and Babylon. Dura-Europos had been continually settled and fortified under the Parthians, and until the peace agreement of AD 166, it had been an autonomous territory in the federation of the Arsacid Empire.¹⁰¹ Palmyrenes had settled in Dura-Europos at least since 33 BC, when in the city on the Euphrates a temple was consecrated for deities imported from the oasis.¹⁰² After the Parthians’ departure, there was no Roman cohort marching into Dura-Europos, but a division of Palmyrene archers under the command of Palmyrene officers, which seems to have had no direct relation to the Roman military. Through two texts from the Mithraeum of Dura-Europos, we know two of the commanders: a certain Ethpeni, who put up a relief showing a *tauroktonos* scene there in AD 168,¹⁰³ and one Zenobios, who put up a dedica-

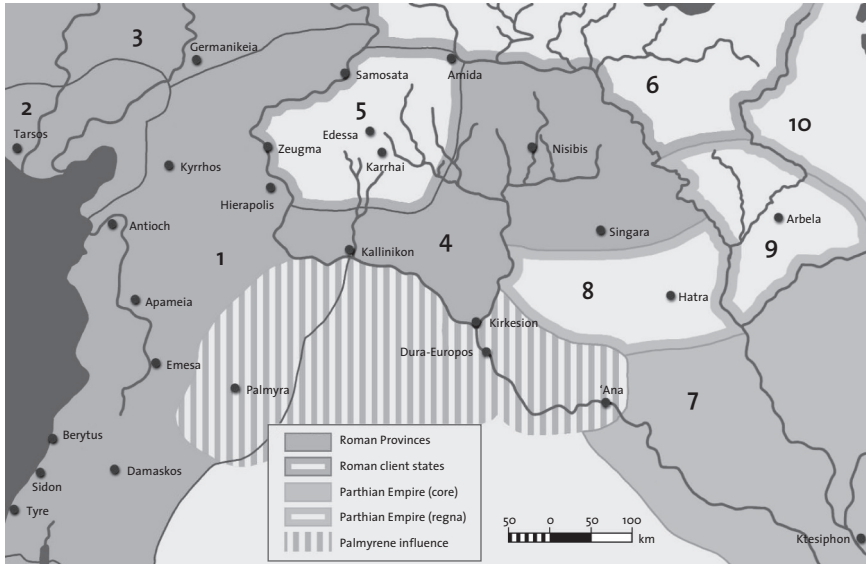


Figure 6.5 Syria and Mesopotamia, AD 166. Roman province of Syria (1), Roman province of Cilicia (2), Roman province of Cappadocia (3), Roman province of Mesopotamia (4), Kingdom of Osroene (5), Kingdom of Armenia (6), Parthian Empire (7), Hatra (8), Kingdom of Adiabene (9), Kingdom of Media Atropatene (10)

tory inscription in AD 170/171.¹⁰⁴ In addition, the Mithraeum's walls are covered with graffiti, with which soldiers immortalized themselves. Without doubt they are all of Palmyrene origin.¹⁰⁵

The division of Palmyrene archers which were deployed in Dura-Europos in the years after the end of the war, may have been a regular Roman auxiliary unit, as one should have expected. Then the commanding officers would have had to be Roman citizens and they would not have held the title of *stratēgos*. Since all the members were Palmyrenes without Roman citizenship, the archers must be considered as soldiers of the city of Palmyra, who were not integrated into the command structure of the Roman military, at least not formally. This is surprising, because by the AD 160s there were regular Palmyrene units in service in numerous other parts of the Empire.¹⁰⁶ After AD 166, there are also indications of a Palmyrene military presence in 'Āna, Bījān and Gamla', some 150 kilometres downstream.¹⁰⁷

How to explain that Palmyrene and no Roman soldiers were garrisoned in Dura-Europos and the other garrison towns on the Euphrates? What form of border management is most likely to be reconciled with the record? From the Palmyrene point of view, the fortification of the Euphrates route was only consistent. A look at the map (Figure 6.5) shows that the deployment of Palmyrene

soldiers, especially in Dura-Europos and 'Āna, closed a gap. There is evidence of Palmyrene military presence before AD 161 in various key positions along the road – the main route of the Mesopotamian long-distance trade – running between the oasis and Hīt on the Euphrates, namely in Umm al-Amad 22 kilometres south of Palmyra, Umm as-Selabiḥ 115 kilometres to the south-east and in the direction of Hīt, near al-Qa'ara, where the road crosses a valley, and near Umm-Qubar in the Wādī Ḥaurān, just before its confluence with the Euphrates.¹⁰⁸ With the arrival of Palmyrene soldiers into the outposts on the Euphrates, the ring of garrisons closed around the eastern part of the Syrian Desert. For all those planning to attack caravans, this was bad news. Perhaps this is the reason why, in the caravan inscriptions from AD 161 onward, it is significantly rarer to read reports of deadly dangers, from which merchants were saved.

But also, from the Roman point of view, guarding the Euphrates route with Palmyrene soldiers who were not under Roman command was a sensible arrangement. First, the oasis inhabitants were fundamentally more familiar with the specific conditions of the steppe frontier than the Roman military. The representatives of the Palmyrene elites, who now commanded the units on the Euphrates, were related by way of kinship networks to the chiefs of nomadic clans who had to be controlled by them, so that violence was needed only on extremely rare occasions. There was, in any case, no doubt whatsoever of the loyalty of the Palmyrenes. The business model of their long-distance trade strongly required excellent relations with the Empire. Why, then, should Palmyrenes mess around with the Romans by abusing their trust? In the decades following AD 166, the entire area between Palmyra in the west, the Euphrates in the north and Hīt in the east, was a protectorate of the Palmyrenes, in which they themselves provided security and order. The fact that this was possible shows how autonomously Palmyra still operated. The metropolis in the oasis had such political leeway, as no other city of the Empire could claim for itself.

With the peace agreement of AD 166, Rome had returned once again to the indirect control of wide areas, this time not in Syria, but by the Euphrates and on its far side, in Mesopotamia. Thus the logic of gradually increasing the intensity of government was again in force. The next step on the predefined path of the conquered territories towards provincialization is marked by the Parthian campaign of the emperor Septimius Severus (AD 193–211), who organized two large-scale campaigns. Born in the Libyan city of Lepcis Magna and commander of the Danube forces at the time of his proclamation as emperor, the *princeps* came to power as a usurper during the crisis of the year of the five emperors in AD 193, and at first had to grapple with several rivals.¹⁰⁹ The most dangerous one was the former consul Gaius Pescennius Niger, who had moved up from his original equestrian rank, and in AD 193 was governor of the province of Syria. It was only through a tough and extremely brutally-waged civil war that Severus succeeded in confining Niger to Antiochia and finally killing him while he was escaping.

The civil war gained a special dimension owing to the fact that Pescennius could not only rely on the population of the Near Eastern provinces and on many

cities, but apparently had also struck deals, against Severus, with the Parthians and assorted Parthian *reges*, including the king of Hatra, but also king Abgar of Osroene. The Parthians at least did not miss the opportunity to march into Roman Mesopotamia with its relative vacuum of power, while large parts of the Roman army were bound in the civil war. Cassius Dio reports that the Parthians under their king Vologaises V (circa 191–208) were on the point of conquering Nisibis, when, back from his victory over Niger, Severus counter-attacked and expelled the Parthians from upper Mesopotamia (195).¹¹⁰ The chronology of the campaign is quite confused, and Dio's text is only fragmentarily preserved. Severus, however, already on this first campaign seems to have tried, though unsuccessfully, to capture the fortress of Hatra in the eastern Jazīra.

After the Emperor had gone briefly to Gaul to remove his second rival, Clodius Albinus, from the race for the imperial purple (AD 196/97), he brought the war back to the Parthian Empire (197–199), where he conquered Babylon and Ktesiphon, but failed once more in the siege of Hatra. The war did not permanently shift the balance of power between the Parthians and Rome, it resulted, however, in a comprehensive reorganization of the entire region to both sides of the Euphrates. The kingdom of Osroene, whose King Abgar had made the mistake of backing Pescennius Niger, was not completely annexed, but practically reduced to the size of a city-state. Only Edessa's immediate surroundings remained to the



Figure 6.6 Berlin Tondo, c. AD 200. Depicted are Septimius Severus, his Emesa-born wife Iulia Domna and their son Caracalla. Originally, next to Caracalla, his brother Geta was portrayed; his face was erased, after Caracalla had killed his younger brother in AD 211. Berlin, Antikensammlung

kings, the rest was added – presumably in AD 199 – to the newly-formed province of Mesopotamia, which extended up to the Tigris in the east, and as far as Jabal Sinjar in the south.¹¹¹

Syria's political map was also completely redrawn. The most conspicuous change was that the old province of Syria was divided into two sub-provinces. Syria Phoenice got the south, with the Phoenician coast, the mountains and the Beqaa Valley, the Damascus area and the Syrian Desert including Palmyra. Syria Coele, the “hollow” Syria, comprised the north of the province, from the Syrian tetrapolis up to the Euphrates, including in fact the strip that stretched along the river up to Dura-Europos and beyond. The main purpose of this measure was to prevent individual governors from commanding too many legions. As governor, Severus himself had used the legions he commanded to usurp power. As a result of this, he was acutely aware of the dangers that could arise from multiple-legion commands. Now in each of the two new provinces there was only one legion left, and little reason for their commanders to get overconfident.

This meant that Palmyra became administratively separated from its hinterland by the Euphrates, to which it had maintained very close relations for centuries. At the same time, under Severus, Roman rule over the desert strip between the oasis and the Euphrates became formalized to a previously unknown degree. The area around Dura-Europos was now no longer a Palmyrene protectorate, but stood definitely under the jurisdiction of Syria Coele's governor. What is more, the Palmyrene units garrisoned in the strongholds on the Euphrates were converted into regular Roman units. Dura-Europos was the garrison for the *cohors XX Palmyrenorum*, which stood under the command of a Roman prefect, though its troops continued the tradition of the Palmyrene archers, who had been garrisoned in Dura-Europos since AD 166. Being located in Mesopotamia, the Ḥābūr was heavily fortified as well, so that many soldiers from other parts of the Empire poured into the region, changing its face permanently.¹¹²

In the Severan period, Palmyra's status also lost much of its former ambiguity between affiliation to and autonomy from the Roman Empire. Regular Roman units have been documented in Palmyra since the middle of the second century, when the *ala I Ulpia dromedariorum* was garrisoned in the city. After the peace agreement of AD 166, it was followed by the *ala I Ulpia singularium* and the *ala I Thracum Herculiana*, as well as other units, whose number increased in time. The garrison in the oasis grew steadily and at a rapid pace.¹¹³ The continued deployment of new troops to Palmyra can certainly not be explained by an actual threat from the Parthians, and only partially by the military ambitions of the Severan emperors in the region. These were, without question, far-reaching, but for their military campaigns, the emperors always moved in parts of the army ad hoc from other areas of the Empire. The deployment of Roman troops in Palmyra can best be explained by the consideration that units which were recruited in the Palmyrene were deployed ever more frequently far from home, be it in Britain, North Africa or on the Danube. In the medium term, therefore, Palmyra and its hinterland became increasingly interwoven with the Empire militarily. With a balance of migration which was probably levelled, the volume of military mobility

must have been enormous. In spite of all differences, which still existed, Palmyra was on its way to more imperial normality.

The integration through military migration was now accompanied by an increasingly noticeable administrative-legal linkage of the oasis city with the Empire. Apparently, Rome was increasingly interfering in the inner affairs of Palmyra. In AD 198, the *boulē* and *dēmos* issued an honorary decree for Aelius Bora, who held the office of "peace strategist,"¹¹⁴ which had previously not been occupied. Bora's task was to secure the trade routes, which had apparently again become more dangerous. For his appointment, two governors of the province of Syria Phoenice, Manilius Fuscus and his successor Venidius Rufus, had their say.

Even more telling is the granting of the status of a *colonia* to Palmyra in AD 211/212, presumably still before Caracalla issued the *constitutio Antoniniana*, by which he declared, with a pen stroke, all the free inhabitants of the Empire to be Roman citizens. By law, the Palmyrenes already were Romans because of the status of their city as a titular colony, with which their city had also received the *ius Italicum*.¹¹⁵ This legal title made Palmyra equal to the cities of Italy, and above all made it exempt from the usual taxes to be paid by provincial towns. Formally, the granting of the status of *colonia* and the *ius Italicum* represented an immense gain in prestige for Palmyra, which had received its first imperial visit almost a century before and had undergone a rapid ascent in the second century AD. But it was a double-edged sword. The resounding titles could hardly compensate the Palmyrenes sufficiently for the far-reaching loss of their autonomy, which had been brought about by the Severans. For the business model of the oasis' merchants, the de facto annexation through Rome meant a severe setback. In the medium term, it was a heavy burden rather than a privilege and cost the Palmyrenes the credit of trust they had with the Parthians, especially after the Sasanians took over in the East.

As if this had not been bad enough, Caracalla promptly picked a new war with the Parthian neighbours. The campaign was fought in Assyria, on the far side of the Tigris, from AD 216 onwards. Strategically it had no direct consequences. The two hostile empires, however, slipped into a crisis, from which only the Romans recovered. Their emperor Caracalla was assassinated near Edessa in AD 217, in the middle of the campaign. His successor Macrinus soon lost support and authority, while the Empire sank in a civil war, from which the 14-year-old Elagabalus, the Emesa-born grandnephew of the defunct Septimius Severus, emerged victorious. Under young Elagabalus, who as a trained priest of the sun wanted to raise his ancestral god to the rank of the highest deity of the Roman pantheon, the Empire all but glided into a religious war.¹¹⁶

The Parthian Empire was affected much worse. A war between the rival brothers Vologais VI and Artabanos IV had been smouldering there since AD 212. Caracalla had believed that, torn as it was by civil war, the Empire to the east was an easy target for his high-flown expansionist plans, which were a match for Alexander the Great. He was mistaken. The war with Rome, imposed by Caracalla upon the Parthians, was the last nail in the coffin of the worn-out Empire. The peace agreement with Rome had not yet been concluded, when the

rival Parthian kings had suddenly to deal with a new opponent. This time he came from the interior, and was a renegade king in the Persis. Starting from the small kingdom of Darabgird, Ardashir I was single-mindedly enlarging his dominion. Challenged in this way, Artabanos did not succeed in stifling the rebellion. Near Hormizdagan, Artabanos fell fighting against Ardashir (AD 224), who subdued the entire Parthian Empire at a breathtaking pace. Finally, around AD 227, Vologaises also had to give way to him. The dynasty of the Sasanians, founded by Ardashir, had ousted the Arsacids from rule.

In spite of the many continuities that connected the Persian Empire of the Sasanians with the Parthian Empire of the Arsacids, Rome was now facing a completely different opponent. The defensive and largely decentralized Empire of the Parthians, which latterly had been devastated by internal conflicts, had given way to a tightly organized military state, which swiftly diverted the energy of its internal expansion towards the outside and forthwith reached for Rome's eastern provinces and the riches hoarding there. For Palmyra and its long-distance trade, the turnaround in the East created a radically new situation. Despite some hot conflicts and an almost permanent ice age between the two great powers, the merchants from the oasis had moved in the thicket of the Romano-Parthian steppe frontier with somnambulistic certainty. After all, in the 209 years from Germanicus' visit in AD 19 to Ardashir's final victory over the Arsacids in AD 227, in total there had only been 15 years of war. The remaining 194 years had been peaceful, despite some crises here and there, and peace is the merchant's best friend. It was this peace that was now at an end. The signs were set for war.

Notes

- 1 Plin. nat. 5,19,81f. Cf. Maurice Sartre, *The Middle East under Rome* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 70–80.
- 2 Ios. ant. Iud. 14,39. Cf. Elaine A. Myers, *The Ituraeans and the Roman Near East. Reassessing the Sources*, vol. 147, Society for New Testament studies. Monograph series (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 162.
- 3 For an excellent overview: Nikos Kokkinos, *The Herodian Dynasty. Origins, Role in Society and Eclipse*, vol. 30, Journal for the study of the Pseudepigrapha. Supplement series (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998). Cf. Klaus Bringmann, *Geschichte der Juden im Altertum. Vom babylonischen Exil bis zur arabischen Eroberung* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 2005), 181–226.
- 4 Thus the title of an influential work by Edward N. Luttwak, *The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire. From the First Century A.D. to the Third* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976).
- 5 For instance Hor. carm. saec. 53–56: *iam mari terraque manus potentis / Medus Albanasque timet securis, / iam Scythae responsa petunt, superbi / nuper et Indi* (“Now the Parthians fear our forces, powerful / On land, and on sea: they fear the Alban axes, / Now the once proud Indians, now the Scythians / Beg for an answer”).
- 6 Michael Sommer, “Pax Augusta – Roms imperialer Imperativ und das Axiom der Weltherrschaft,” in *Augustus. Herrscher an der Zeitenwende*, ed. Marietta Horster and Florian Schuller (Regensburg: Verlag Friedrich Pustet, 2014).
- 7 The uneasiness the withdrawal caused in Rome is highlighted by Tac. ann. 4,32 – a passage than may refer to the author's own period as well: *immota quippe aut modice lacessita pax, maestae urbis res et princeps proferendi imperi incuriosus*

- erat ("for this was an age of peace unbroken or half-heartedly challenged, of tragedy in the capital, of a prince careless to extend the Empire").
- 8 On Trajan's Parthian campaign below, p.113–14.
- 9 Tac. ann. 2,42,7.
- 10 Cass. Dio 59,8; Suet. Gaius 16.
- 11 Ios. bell. Iud. 7,7. The question as to whether the *bellum Commagenorum* was real or fictional is discussed by Axel Gebhardt, *Imperiale Politik und provinzielle Entwicklung. Untersuchungen zum Verhältnis Kaiser, Heer und Städten im Syrien der vorseverischen Zeit*. Klio. Beiträge zur Alten Geschichte. Vol. 4 (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2002), 54, n. 3.
- 12 Cass. Dio 50,13,7. On this and on the following: Sartre, *Middle East*, 76–77.
- 13 Cass. Dio 54,4,2.
- 14 Ios. ant. Iud. 19,338.
- 15 Ibid., 20,139.
- 16 An attempt to reconstruct the dynastic networks has been made by Richard D. Sullivan, "The dynasty of Emesa," *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt II* 8 (1977); "Papyri reflecting the eastern dynastic network," *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt II* (1977).
- 17 Tac. ann. 12,54,1; Ios. ant. Iud. 20,7,2.
- 18 On the sanctuary of Elagabalus: Leonardo de Arrizabalaga y Prado, *The Emperor Elagabalus. Fact or Fiction?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 165–83; Martin Frey, *Untersuchungen zur Religion und zur Religionspolitik des Kaisers Elagabal*, vol. 62, *Historia Einzelschriften* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 1989); Martijn Icks, *The Crimes of Elagabalus. The Life and Legacy of Rome's Decadent Boy Emperor* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2011), 48–52; on Baalbek: Daniel Lohmann, "Das Heiligtum des Jupiter Heliopolitanus," in *Baalbek – Heliopolis. 10000 Jahre Stadtgeschichte*, ed. Margarete van Ess and Klaus Rheidt (Darmstadt: Philipp von Zabern, 2014). In Baalbek, an honorific statue with an inscription (IGLS 6 2760) had been put up.
- 19 Ios. bell. Iud. 7,226.
- 20 Sartre, *Middle East*, 77.
- 21 IGLS 5 2212. Cf. Sartre, *Middle East*.
- 22 Fergus Millar, *The Roman Near East. 31 BC–AD 337* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 80.
- 23 Peter Edwell, *Between Rome and Persia. The Middle Euphrates, Mesopotamia and Palmyra under Roman Control* (London: Routledge, 2008), 18–20; Gebhardt, *Imperiale Politik* 4, 41–48.
- 24 This is, however, claimed by Millar, *Roman Near East*, 83, and, similarly, Udo Hartmann, *Das palmyrenische Teilreich*. Oriens et Occidens. Vol. 2, Stuttgart (Franz Steiner, 2001), 49.
- 25 PAT 0259 = CIS 3913, P118; G194 (Corbulo); P74 G150 (Mucianus). Cf. John F. Matthews, "The tax law of Palmyra. Evidence for economic history in a city of the Roman east," *Journal of Roman Studies* 74 (1984): 161, who concedes that the provisions of Roman magistrates were "either issued for the specific use of Palmyra or at least applied to it by analogy with other cities in Syria." On the tax law in more detail below, p. 121–22.
- 26 AE 1933, 205. Cf. Edwell, *Between Rome and Persia*, 42–44; Gebhardt, *Imperiale Politik* 4, 64; Millar, *Roman Near East*, 83; Sartre, *Middle East*, 69–70.
- 27 D. L. Kennedy and D. N. Riley, *Rome's Desert Frontier from the Air* (London: Batsford, 1990), 117.
- 28 Sartre, *Middle East*, 70.
- 29 Millar, *Roman Near East*, 83. Millar admits that it is not certain whether or not the road continued all the way down to the Euphrates.
- 30 Andrew M. Smith, *Roman Palmyra. Identity, Community, and State Formation* (New York: Clarendon Press, 2013), 24.

- 31 Plin. nat. 5,88. Above, p. 72.
- 32 Thus convincingly Edwell, *Between Rome and Persia*, 44, contra Glen W. Bowersock, "Syria under Vespasian," *Journal of Roman Studies* 68 (1973): 135f; Jean Starcky and Michał Gawlikowski, *Palmyre*. 2nd ed. (Paris: Librairie d'Amérique et d'Orient : Jean Maisonneuve, 1985), 37, and Lucinda Dirven, *The Palmyrenes of Dura-Europos. A Study of Religious Interaction in Roman Syria* (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 20.
- 33 On the Romano-Parthian war of AD 58–63 and the events leading to it: Mason Hammond, "Corbulo and Nero's eastern policy," *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 45 (1934); Arnaldo Momigliano, "Corbulone e la politica verso i Parti," in *Atti del secondo congresso nazionale di studi romani* (Roma: Paolo Cremonese, 1931); Davide Salvo, "La crisi romano-partica del 54–63 d.C. La prospettiva romana nel rescontro di Tacito," *Hormos. Nuova serie* 1–2 (2008–2009); Werner Schur, *Die Orientpolitik des Kaisers Nero*, vol. 15, *Klio Beiheft* (Leipzig: Dieterich, 1923); Michael Sommer, "La crisi romano-partica 53–64 d.C. – la prospettiva 'orientale,'" *Hormos. Nuova serie* 10 (2008/09); *Römische Geschichte. Von den Anfängen bis zum Untergang* (Stuttgart: Kröner, 2016), 507–08.
- 34 Tac. ann. 13,6.
- 35 On Trajan's Parthian war the monograph by Frank A. Lepper, *Trajan's Parthian War* (London: Oxford, 1948). Cf. in addition Maria G. Angeli Bertinelli, "I Romani oltre l'Eufrate nel II secolo d. C. (le provincie di Assiria, di Mesopotamia e di Osroene)," *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt II* 9, 1 (1976); Julien Guey, *Essai sur la guerre parthique de Trajan* (Bucuresti: Imprimerie Nationale, 1937); C. S. Lightfoot, "Trajan's Parthian war and the fourth-century perspective," *Journal of Roman Studies* 80 (1990); R. P. Longden, "Notes on the Parthian campaigns of Trajan," *Journal of Roman Studies* 21 (1931); George Rawlinson, *Parthia. The Story of the Nations*. 2nd ed (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1894), 299–317.
- 36 Cass. Dio 68,17,1.
- 37 Freya Stark, *Rome on the Euphrates. The story of a Frontier* (London: Murray, 1966), 209.
- 38 Cass. Dio 68,29,1. Dio here insinuates that Trajan lied to the Senate on purpose.
- 39 Ibid., 68,30,1. Cf. Gunnar Seelentag, *Taten und Tugenden Traians. Herrschaftsdarstellung im Principat* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 2004), 489–90.
- 40 Thus assumed by Stark, *Rome on the Euphrates*, 211.
- 41 Gary K. Young, *Rome's Eastern Trade. International Commerce and Imperial Policy. 31 BC–AD 305* (London: Routledge, 2001), 46–47.
- 42 Eivind Heldaas Seland, *Ships of the Desert and Ships of the Sea. Palmyra in the World Trade of the First Three Centuries CE*. (Philippika. Vol. 101, Wiesbaden, 2016), 101, 37–38.
- 43 Cass. Dio 69,1,1; cf. Susanne Mortensen, *Hadrian. Eine Deutungsgeschichte* (Bonn: Habelt, 2004), 27–55.
- 44 Kostas Buraselis, "Zum hadrianischen Regierungsstil im griechischen Osten oder vom kaiserlichen Agieren und Reagieren," in *Staatlichkeit und politisches Handeln in der römischen Kaiserzeit*, ed. Hans-Ulrich Wiemer (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2006); Sommer, *Römische Geschichte*, 549–54. For the exact itinerary: Helmut Halfmann, *Itinera principum. Geschichte und Typologie der Kaiserreisen im Römischen Reich*, vol. 2, Heidelberg althistorische Beiträge und epigraphische Studien (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 1986), 188–210; Demetrios Kritsotakis, *Hadrian and the Greek East. Imperial Policy and Communication* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University, 2008), 66–67.
- 45 Millar, *Roman Near East*, 106.
- 46 Werner Eck, "Der Bar Kochba-Aufstand der Jahre 132–136 und seine Folgen für die Provinz Judaea/Syria Palaestina," in *Judaea Socia – Judaea Capta. Atti del convegno internazionale Cividale del Friuli, 22–24 settembre 2011*, ed. Gianpaolo Urso, I convegni

- della Fondazione Niccolò Canussio (Pisa: Edizioni ETS, 2012); "The Bar Kokhba Revolt. The Roman point of view," *Journal of Roman Studies* 89 (1999); *Rom herausfordern. Bar Kochba im Kampf gegen das Imperium Romanum. Das Bild des Bar Kochba-Aufstandes im Spiegel der neuen epigraphischen Überlieferung* (Roma: Unione internazionale degli istituti di archeologia, storia e storia dell'arte in Roma, 2007).
- 47 Michael Zahrt, "Das Fiskalgesetz von Palmyra und zur Geschichte der Stadt in hadrianischer Zeit," *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 62 (1986): 291–92, has suggested dating the imperial visit to the year AD 123 and hence into the time frame of Hadrian's first voyage. This is very unlikely. First, though the emperor did tour the eastern provinces of Asia Minor on this voyage, there is no evidence for Hadrian having taken a detour via Syria and the oasis of Tadmur. Second, the epigraphic evidence from Palmyra itself points to the year AD 130/31 instead of the 120s.
- 48 PAT 0305 = CIG 4482 = IGR III 1054 = CIS 3959 = Inv. 1 2.
- 49 Ferdinand Gregorovius, *Der Kaiser Hadrian. Gemälde der römisch-hellenischen Welt zu seiner Zeit*, 2nd ed. (Stuttgart: J. G. Cotta, 1884), 145f., who also knows about Hadrian's visit to Palmyra, which he dates correctly.
- 50 PAT 1375 = Inv. 10 39.
- 51 PAT 0259 = CIS 3913, G Ia, 2–3.
- 52 PAT 1370.
- 53 For a detailed investigation of *grammateis* in Athens and mainland Greece Terry J. Abbott, *The Ancient Greek Secretary. A Study of Secretaries in Athens and the Peloponnese* (Manchester: University of Manchester Library, 2012). I am grateful to Kaja Harter-Uibopuu for having brought relevant scholarship and recent discussions to my attention.
- 54 E. S. Bouchier, *A Short History of Antioch. 300 B.C.–A.D. 1268* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1921), 54.
- 55 PAT 0269: [Παλμυρη]νῶν ἡ [π]όλις bzw. *gbl tdmry' klhn* ("the entire people of Tadmur").
- 56 Jean Cantineau, "Tadmorea," *Syria* 14 (1933): 174–76, no. 2B: Ἡ [βουλ]ῆ καὶ ὁ [δῆμος] Αἰράνην Βωννέο[υς] / [τὸν καὶ Ρ]άββηλο[ν], / κοσμητῆ[ν] εὐσε[βῆ] καὶ [φι]λόπατριν, τεμῆς χάριν / [ἐ]τοὺς επτ' μηνὸς Ξανδικοῦ.
- 57 Smith, *Roman Palmyra*, 126.
- 58 Thus *ibid.*, 122.
- 59 Below, p. 194–199.
- 60 PAT 0312: [Παλ]μυρηνὸν bzw. *tdmry'*. Cf. Ted Kaizer, *The Religious Life of Palmyra. A Study of the Social Patterns of Worship in the Roman Period* (Stuttgart: Steiner, 2002), 101.
- 61 PAT 0270: [ἔμ]πο[ρ]οι Παλμυρηνοὶ καὶ Ἑλλήν]ες. Cf. Monika Schuol, *Die Charakene. Ein mesopotamisches Königreich in hellenistisch-parthischer Zeit* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 2000), 48–50.
- 62 See Frank Welz, "Identität und Alterität in soziologischer Perspektive." In *wir / ihr / sie. Identität und Alterität in Theorie und Methode.*, ed. Wolfgang Eßbach. Identitäten und Alteritäten (Würzburg: Ergon, 2000).
- 63 PAT 2778: ἀγαθὸν πολεῖτην. Cf. Jean Cantineau, "Tadmorea," *Syria* 19 (1938): 76f; Jean-Baptiste Yon, *Les notables de Palmyre* (Beyrouth: Institut français d'archéologie du Proche-Orient, 2002), 36.
- 64 PAT 2778: εὖνουν πρὸς τὴν ἴδιαν πατρίδα.
- 65 The now classical study in euergetism is: Paul Veyne, *Le pain et le cirque. Sociologie historique d'un pluralisme politique* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1976). Cf. Sabien Colpaert, "Euergetism and the gift," in *Gift Giving and the 'Embedded' Economy in the Ancient World*, ed. Filippo Carlà and Maja Gori (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2014); Christina Kokkinia, *Die Opramoas-Inschrift von Rhodiapolis. Euergetismus und soziale Elite in Lykien* (Bonn: R. Habelt, 2000). On the exchange between different forms of capital: Pierre Bourdieu, *Propos sur le champ politique* (Lyon: Presses universitaires de Lyon, 2000).

- 66 On the concept of leisure class: Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class. An Economic Study in the Evolution of Institutions* (New York: Macmillan, 1899).
- 67 Max Weber, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft. Die Stadt* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000), 22,5, 3–4.
- 68 Below, p. 171–183.
- 69 *Hadrianē* Palmyra or *hdyrn' idmr* respectively: PAT 1374; PAT 0259 = CIS 3913 P II 1; IGR I 1169; CIS 3902. An interesting footnote to this episode is added by Stephanus of Byzantium's late antique encyclopaedia which claims that Palmyra has been refounded under the emperor Hadrian (Steph. Byz. s.v. Παλμυρα).
- 70 PAT 1423. Cf. Yon, *Les notables de Palmyre*, 204–06.
- 71 IDR 3/2 18. Cf. *Ibid.*, 119.
- 72 CIL 16 dipl. 78.
- 73 Inv. 10 79. Cf. Yon, *Les notables de Palmyre*, 120.
- 74 Below, p. 188–194.
- 75 Schuol, *Die Charakene*, 47–90.
- 76 Matthews, “Tax law,” 172. Cf. Kai Brodersen, “Das Steuergesetz von Palmyra,” in *Palmyra. Geschichte, Kunst und Kultur der syrischen Oasenstadt*, ed. Erwin Maria Ruprechtsberger (Linz: Druck- und Verlagsanstalt Gutenberg, 1987); Kenneth Lönnqvist, “The tax law of Palmyra and the introduction of the Roman monetary system to Syria. A re-evaluation,” in *Jebel Bishri in Context. Introduction to the Archaeological Studies and the Neighbourhood of Jebel Bishri in Central Syria. Proceedings of a Nordic Research Training Seminar in Syria, May 2004*, ed. Minna Lönnqvist. BAR International Series (Oxford: Hadrian Books Ltd, 2008); Michael Zahrt, “Das Fiskalgesetz von Palmyra und zur Geschichte der Stadt in hadrianischer Zeit,” *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 62 (1986) and now Seland, *Ships of the Desert*, 101, 30–31.
- 77 Michał Gawlikowski, “Palmyra as a trading centre.” *Iraq* 56 (1994): 28; Matthews, “Tax law,” 172.
- 78 Seland, *Ships of the Desert*, 101, 30–31.
- 79 PAT 0259 = CIS 3913, G II 1–8; P II 2–6.
- 80 *Ibid.*, G II 19–30; P II 13–22.
- 81 *Ibid.*, P II 128–129.
- 82 *Ibid.*, G II 16–18; P I 67.
- 83 *Ibid.*, G I 173–174; P II 96–97.
- 84 *Ibid.*, G I.
- 85 PAT 0197 (AD 132); PAT 1062 (AD 145/146). See Gebhardt, *Imperiale Politik*, 4, 297–98; Schuol, *Die Charakene*, 58–60 u. 66–69.
- 86 PAT 1397.
- 87 Inv. 9 23 = AE 1933, 207.
- 88 Michael Sommer, *Roms orientalische Steppengrenze. Palmyra – Edessa – Dura-Europos – Hatra. Eine Kulturgeschichte von Pompeius bis Diocletian*. *Oriens et Occidens*. Vol. 9, (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 2005), 9, 156.
- 89 PAT 1062,22f.: κτίσαντα | [ἐ]ν Ὀλογασίᾳ ναὸν τῶν Σεβαστῶν κ[αὶ] κ[α]θ[ι]ερῶ]σαν[τα].
- 90 Anthony R. Birley, *Marcus Aurelius. A Biography*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2004); Jörg Fündling, *Marc Aurel. Kaiser und Philosoph* (Darmstadt: Primus, 2008); Claudia Horst, *Marc Aurel. Philosophie und politische Macht zur Zeit der Zweiten Sophistik*, vol. 225, *Historia. Einzelschriften* (Stuttgart: Steiner, 2013); Klaus Rosen, *Marc Aurel* (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt Taschenbuch Verlag, 1997).
- 91 Edwell, *Between Rome and Persia*, 25.
- 92 Hist. Aug. Ver. 6,7–9.
- 93 *Ibid.*, 7,1–3. Cf. Cass. Dio 71,2.
- 94 The later historiographical tradition, which heavily leaned towards Marcus Aurelius, visibly made an effort to minimize Verus' contribution to the military success, as it

- appeared to threaten the older man's primacy. Hardly accidentally did Marcus promote his two sons to the rank of Caesar in AD 166 (Hist. Aug. Marc. 16,1; 21,3; Hist. Aug. Comm. 1,10; 11,13f.). Cf. Olivier Hekster, *Commodus. An Emperor at the Crossroads* (Amsterdam: J. C. Gieben, 2002), 30.
- 95 Luk. quomod. 19 and 31.
- 96 Fronto Ver. imp. 2, 24: *Dausara et Nicephorium et Artaxa ductu auspicioque tuo armis capta sunt* [. . .].
- 97 PAT 1373. Cf. Schuol, *Die Charakene*, 79–80.
- 98 AE 1912, 55.
- 99 Steven E. Sidebotham, *Roman Economic Policy in the Erythra Thalassa. 30 B.C.-A.D. 217*, vol. 91, Mnemosyne. Supplementum (Leiden: Brill, 1986), 95–6; Young, *Rome's Eastern Trade*, 80–81.
- 100 For a meticulous reconstruction Andreas Luther, "Elias von Nisibis und die Chronologie der edessenischen König," *Klio* 81 (1999): 185–90; based on it Sommer, *Roms orientalische Steppengrenze*, 9, 238–39. Obviously ignorant of Luther's fundamental work Steven K. Ross, *Roman Edessa. Politics and Culture on the Eastern Fringes of the Roman Empire. 114–242 CE* (London: Routledge, 2001), 36–37, and Sartre, *Middle East*, 146–47.
- 101 Dirven, *Palmyrenes of Dura-Europos*, 4–11; Fergus Millar, "Dura-Europos under Parthian rule," in *Das Partherreich und seine Zeugnisse*, ed. Josef Wiesehöfer (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 1998).
- 102 Nigel Pollard, *Soldiers, Cities, and Civilians in Roman Syria* (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 2000), 143–44; Seland, *Ships of the Desert*, 101, 36.
- 103 Michael Rostovtzeff, *The Excavations at Dura-Europos. Preliminary report of 7th–8th season of work* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press 1939), 83, no. 845. One of the inscriptions commemorates the donator: "A good offering, dedicated by Ethpeni the *stratēgos*, son of Zabdea, who is in command of the archers, who are in Dura. In the month of Adar in the year 480 [AD 168]."
- 104 Ibid., 84, no. 845. Cf. Michał Gawlikowski, "Palmyre et l'Euphrate," *Syria* 60 (1983): 61; Pollard, *Soldiers, Cities, 144*; Edwell, *Between Rome and Persia*, 55–56.
- 105 For details cf. Tommaso Gnoli, "The Mithraeum of Dura-Europos. New perspectives," in *Religion, Society and Culture at Dura-Europos*, ed. Ted Kaizer, Yale Classical Studies (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).
- 106 The first unit of Palmyrene archers whose presence is attested was garrisoned in the Dacian camp of Porolissum. Cf. Ovidiu Tentea, "Some remarks on the Palmyreni Sagitarii. On the first records of Palmyrenes within the Roman army," in *Scripta Classica. Radu Ardevan sexagenarii dedicata*, ed. Ioan Rusu-Bolindet, et al. (Cluj-Napoca: Centre for Roman Studies, 2011).
- 107 Edwell, *Between Rome and Persia*, 73, 1721. Gawlikowski, "Palmyre et l'Euphrate," 60f. 592, based on a dedicatory inscription from Palmyra, which mentions a Nabataean cavalryman garrisoned "in *hyrt*' and the camp of 'n'" (PAT 0319 = CIS 3973), goes so far as to speculate that Palmyrene troops had already been stationed in various garrisons along the Euphrates before the outbreak of war in AD 161. He identifies *hyrt*' with Hīt near present-day Baghdad. The hypothesis cannot be proved, but has a lot to say for itself. If indeed the Euphrates had been guarded by Palmyrenes under Parthian rule, then it was a good example of the political twilight prevailing at the steppe frontier, where no clear boundary lines existed, but only different shades of grey.
- 108 Klaas Dijkstra, *Life and Loyalty. A Study in the Socio-Religious Culture of Syria and Mesopotamia in the Graeco-Roman Period based on Epigraphical Evidence*, vol. 128, Religions in the Graeco-Roman world (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1995), 86; Seland, *Ships of the Desert*, 101, 16–17.
- 109 Anthony R. Birley, *The African Emperor. Septimus Severus*, 2nd ed. (London: B. T. Batsford, 1988), 89–120; Markus Scholz and Jens Wegmann, "Der blutige Weg zur Macht. Der Bürgerkrieg 193–197," in *Bürgerrecht und Krise. Die Constitutio*

- Antoniniana 212 n. Chr. und ihre innenpolitischen Folgen*, ed. Barbara Pferdehirt and Markus Scholz (Mainz: Verlag des Römisch-Germanischen Zentralmuseums Mainz, 2012).
- 110 Cass. Dio 75,2.
- 111 Tilmann Bechert, *Die Provinzen des römischen Reiches. Einführung und Überblick* (Mainz am Rhein: Verlag Philipp von Zabern, 1999), 210; Andreas Luther, “Nordmesopotamien,” in *Die Zeit der Soldatenkaiser*, ed. Klaus-Peter Johné (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2008), 501–02.
- 112 On Roman soldiers as agents of Romanization in the Ḥabūr region: Sommer, *Roms orientalische Steppengrenze*, 9, 305–29.
- 113 Edwell, *Between Rome and Parthia*, 57–58; Pollard, *Soldiers, Cities*, 43.
- 114 PAT 1063: στρατηγὸς ἐπὶ τῆς εἰρήνης.
- 115 That the status of a *colonia* and the *ius Italicum* were granted to Palmyra is confirmed by the late Severan jurist Ulpian (Dig. 50,15,1,4–5).
- 116 On the dazzling character of the emperor Elagabalus see Martijn Icks, *The Crimes of Elagabalus. The Life and Legacy of Rome's Decadent Boy Emperor* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2011); Michael Sommer, “Elagabal – Wege zur Konstruktion eines ‘schlechten’ Kaisers,” *Scripta Classica Israelica* 23 (2004).

7 Claiming the Empire

In the summer of AD 260, the Roman emperor Gallienus faced the ruins of his principate. Germanic tribes pushed their way through the Rhine and Danube borders to slaughter, pillage and plunder. Usurpations shook all parts of the Empire. And the eastern provinces, the most prosperous region of the Roman world, were defencelessly exposed to the armies of the Persian king Shapur, who also returned home loaded with plunder. The most severe burden for Gallienus' rule was a crushing defeat suffered by the Roman military that same year, which, even according to the standards of the time, which abounded in dreadful news, could justly be called an *annus horibilis*. Valerian, the Emperor's father, with whom he had jointly ruled the Roman world for the last seven years, had not simply been killed in action, but, shameful disgrace, had been captured by Shapur's Persians near the Mesopotamian city of Edessa.

The path to Edessa

How could it come so far? For what reason were the usually victorious Roman legions suddenly everywhere on the defensive and stumbling from defeat to defeat? If the seasoned Roman army had a hard time fighting against the Persians, eventually failing miserably in AD 260, this was only partly due to inappropriate tactics and to military innovations on the part of the Sasanians, which the legions had to adjust to. These factors also played a role, but the real causes of the disaster of Edessa lie deeply buried in the history of Rome's Empire and its political environment.¹

Even today this period is often referred to as the “crisis” of the third century, implying that there was a cumulation of problems afflicting the Roman world from the AD 220s onwards – or even from the rule of Marcus Aurelius, as some scholars claim. There is empirical proof of persistent military conflicts in the West as well as in the East, political instability with very frequent usurpations and civil wars, a chronic financial crisis of the central government and a partial disentanglement of the imperial economy, with the return of entire regions to self-sufficient local economies. Nevertheless, it would be incorrect to speak of a comprehensive imperial, or even of a “world crisis.”² The Roman Empire in the third century does not present a uniform picture. Parts of the Empire – Italy,

Greece, partially Gaul – in which a certain economic decline can be observed, stood opposite prospering provinces, mainly in the East and South, whose economic power experienced a strong growth compared to the already high level of the second century AD.³ Nevertheless, a number of variables point at an aggravation of critical factors, and, at the very least, one could speak of a political, fiscal and military crisis of the Roman world.

The first thing to change was the Empire's environment. The fall of the Arsacids in the East and the takeover of a new dynasty, the Sasanians, radically altered the balance of power around Armenia and Mesopotamia. Here Rome quickly slipped into a defensive position. Indirectly, with their repeated aggressive wars against the Parthian Empire, most recently under Septimius Severus and Caracalla, the emperors themselves had contributed to the transition. In the West, along the Rhine and the Danube, the rampart of the Roman world had been completely transformed as well. In the first and, still, in the second century AD, the part of Germany lying on the right bank of the Rhine was populated by small, ethnically compact and mostly sedentary tribes, who were largely contained by Rome's diplomacy, although several attempts to turn Germany into a province failed. From the second century onwards, though at first unnoticed by the Romans, completely new patterns of social organization emerged in the tribal areas on the far side of the river. From the old tribes, much larger, highly mobile allegiance units emerged, for whom the Empire, with its relative wealth, constituted an irresistible attraction. Initially in their search for prey, but later also for land, the new tribes, led by charismatic warlords, broke through the Roman borders, facing the emperors with completely new challenges.⁴ Marcus Aurelius was the first to be confronted with the new situation in the Barbaricum, when, at the end of AD 166, thousands of Langobardi and Obii crossed the Danube and devastated Pannonia. The Marcomannic Wars, which were triggered by the invasion and lasted until AD 180, were only the overture to an unquiet century, during which the Romans were compelled to reconsider their military doctrine of rigid frontier defence in favour of a more flexible response strategy.

The social change may have been triggered by environmental factors;⁵ more important than that, however, was contact with the Roman world, which had been persisting from the first century BC and was becoming ever closer since. This contact had influenced the stratification of tribes in the Barbaricum, making it possible for their elites to accumulate material and symbolic resources to a large extent.⁶ While being completely in the dark about the larger picture, the Romans, in the long run, were creating their own opponent, and a deadly one. In AD 213, for the first time, the Alamanni, a confederacy of tribes based in modern south-west Germany, attacked territories close to the frontier in the *Agri Decumates*, in present-day Baden-Wurtemberg, and in Raetia; in AD 233 they returned and were repelled by Severus Alexander; in AD 238, Goths raided the province of Moesia Inferior, modern Bulgaria. The Romans, who still regarded the new tribe as "Scythians," bribed the Goths with money in order to free themselves from danger. Still, the Goths returned, in AD 250, under their king Kniva, a charismatic leader, under whose command they defeated the emperor Decius with his army

near Abrittus (Razgrad in present-day Bulgaria) in AD 251. Decius was the very first Roman emperor to be killed in action. The Goths immediately crossed the Danube border in large numbers, plundering the Balkan provinces (AD 252), the Aegean Sea (AD 254) and, after crossing the Black Sea, northern Asia Minor (AD 254/255). A few years later (presumably in AD 257), the Franks crossed the Rhine frontier, pushing forward as far as the Iberian Peninsula. The Alamanni, under their king Chrocus, are said to have devastated large parts of Gaul in AD 259. They came as far as Milan, where they were confronted and defeated by Gallienus.

No less catastrophic was the military situation in the East. Here, the Persians, under their king Ardashir, had launched an attack on the important frontier fortress of Hatra in AD 229. On this occasion, they were unsuccessful. Hatra sided with the Romans, who garrisoned a cohort in the easily defended city (no later than AD 235). The offensive against Hatra can still be interpreted as an effort by the new rulers to consolidate the old Parthian territory and to bring rebellious



Figure 7.1 Bust of Gordian III, AD 238–244, Berlin, Antikensammlung

vassals to reason. But the Persians were not satisfied with recapturing Parthian possessions. By AD 230, they had raided the Roman province of Mesopotamia. The emperor Severus Alexander (AD 222–235) answered Ardashir's first offensive with a massive counter-attack in the tradition of the Parthian wars, but the campaign failed, partly due to tactical mistakes of the Roman army leadership, partly due to adverse climatic conditions. Part of the invasion army was crushed by the Persians. Severus Alexander had to stop the campaign, when alarming news arrived from the West.

In AD 237, the Persians returned and conquered parts of the province of Mesopotamia. Karrhai, Nisibis and possibly Singara, all important garrisons, had to surrender. Roman positions on the Euphrates were also exposed to Persian attacks. In AD 240/241 Ardashir's son and co-ruler Shapur I succeeded in taking Hatra after a long, logistically challenging siege. The city was destroyed and abandoned. Shapur, who had become sole ruler in AD 242, had made the Romans his chief enemy, and was determined to drive them out of Syria and Mesopotamia. At first, however, he had to repulse the counteroffensive of emperor Gordian III (AD 238–244; Figure 7.1), who had set out from Antioch in the spring of AD 243 to attack northern Mesopotamia, still occupied by the Persians. At Rhesaina his army defeated Shapur. Then he advanced towards Babylonia, reaching it, presumably, at the end of AD 243. There, at Mesiche, west of Ktesiphon, the Roman army suffered a catastrophic defeat in AD 244, Gordian fell in battle or was killed a little later.⁷ His successor, Philip the Arab, was able to conclude, under the circumstances, a relatively favourable peace agreement: the Romans paid war indemnities and renounced influence in Armenia, holding on, however, to Mesopotamia.⁸

Peace did not last long. In AD 252, at the apex of the political crisis in the Roman Empire, Shapur reopened hostilities with his second Roman campaign (Figure 7.2). Although the sources are extremely scarce, it is possible, to some extent, to reconstruct the outline of events. Setting out from the lower Euphrates, the Persians pushed forward to Syria, capturing on their way several of the Roman fortresses on the Euphrates, possibly including Dura-Europos and Kirkesion. At Barbalissos, where they destroyed a Roman army, the Persian troops divided. One column apparently advanced south-west, and was defeated at Emesa, not by a Roman army, but by a militia of local residents.⁹ The second half of the army marched towards the Syrian metropolis of Antioch, at this time the third-largest city of the Empire. Antioch was taken by the Persians after a short siege, an event which left deep traces in the collective memory of the big city.

Besides the city on the Orontes, dozens of other cities fell into Persian hands. Shapur's enterprise seems to have had the character of a pillaging and looting campaign, rather than that of a military campaign intended to permanently subjugate and annex Syria. The Persians did not last long in Antioch and in the other cities west of the Euphrates. With Dura-Europos, however, in AD 256, they conquered the most important of the Roman fortresses on the river, presumably for the second time, after a previous recapture by the Romans. Archaeological investigations

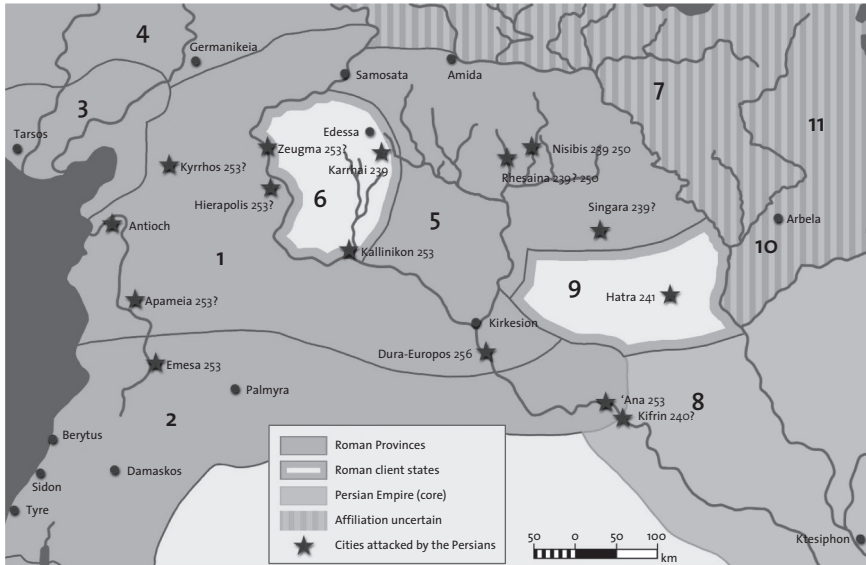


Figure 7.2 Syria and Mesopotamia, AD 230–260. Roman province of Syria Coele (1), Roman province of Syria Phoenice (2), Roman province of Cilicia (3), Roman province of Cappadocia (4), Roman province of Mesopotamia (5), Kingdom of Osroene (6), Kingdom of Armenia (7), Persian Empire of the Sasanians (8), Kingdom of the Arabs at Hatra (9), Kingdom of Adiabene (10), Kingdom of Media Atropatene (11)

have recently revealed how fierce the fighting was for the city – dominating the Euphrates from its high plateau.¹⁰ In the end, Dura-Europos was also abandoned.

Shapur's two Roman campaigns, which continued until AD 256, had destabilized the Roman provinces of Mesopotamia and Syria, claiming innumerable victims, and almost certainly stifling long-distance trade. However, they had not fundamentally altered the balance of power along the steppe frontier, except that with Hatra and Dura-Europos, two important fortress cities had ceased to exist. Apart from this, three major conflicts in a quarter century had exhausted the belligerent empires economically, militarily and psychologically. For the Roman emperors, the threatening scenario on two front-lines meant a permanent overstretch of the resources at their disposal. It led to a vicious circle, in which fiscal, psychological, political and military factors interlocked and influenced each other. From the era of the Severans, the emperors had reacted to the increasing threat to the imperial frontiers by expanding the military. More soldiers cost more money, which brought the treasury to the limits of its financial resources, since it could not infinitely mint precious metals. But even an enlarged army was not invincible, defeats were inevitable. The political system

of the principate, established by Augustus, had not been conceived for emperors to readily cope with military failures.¹¹ Another problem was that emperors could not be everywhere at the same time. Both the military and the population expected, however, to have the chance of being close to the emperor. If in one of the countless military hotspots a local commander was successful, then he was immediately regarded, by civilians and above all by the soldiers, as a salvation-bringer with almost Messianic stature. From here the road to usurpation was usually short: the soldiers urged their own commander to seize power in Rome; civil war was inevitable. The emperors' attempts to buy loyalty with financial favours to the soldiers narrowed their financial scope even further. All factors together impaired the military defensiveness of the Empire so far that it threatened to tumble into a maelstrom of wars and civil wars.

Valerian and Gallienus, the father-and-son emperors rising to the purple in AD 253, at the temporary climax of the military crisis, believed themselves to have found the cure against the overstrain.¹² Father and son shared power as equal



Figure 7.3 Bust of the emperor Gallienus, AD 253–260, Antikensammlung

Augusti, as Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus had done in the AD 160s. This gave them the advantage of being able to show their presence at the same time in two theatres of war and let people feel close to the emperor. Indeed, despite continued warfare in both East and West, they succeeded in keeping the Empire together, at least internally. For the period between Valerian's and Gallienus' accession in AD 253 and the defeat of Edessa in AD 260, there is no single usurpation on record.

Gallienus (Figure 7.3) addressed the problems on the Rhine and Danube, while Valerian soon took up his headquarters in Antioch, which had been recaptured from the Persians. There he devoted himself to the preparation of a great offensive against the Persians, for which he had pulled together troops from all parts of the Empire. Thus, several years passed – too much time to ward off the advance of the Persians against Dura-Europos. Moreover, in order to ensure that sufficient troops were available in the East, the army strength in the West had to be further reduced. Presumably this thinning of the frontier garrisons triggered the catastrophic incursions of barbarians in Gaul. What is more, Gothic raids in Asia Minor and an epidemic outbreak in the army in AD 259 forced Valerian to postpone the campaign against Shapur even further. It was not until the spring of AD 260, that the Roman army was ready for war. Shapur, who was probably very well informed about what was going on in the Roman Empire, had long mobilized his army. The Persians crossed the frontier into Roman Mesopotamia and engaged Valerian, defeating his army between Karrhai and Edessa. Shapur's report on the campaign reports:

In the third campaign, when we attacked Karrhai and Urhai [Edessa] and were besieging Karrhai and Edessa Valerian Caesar marched against us. He had with him a force of 70,000 from Germany, Raetia, Noricum, Dacia, Pannonia, Moesia, Istria, Spain, Africa, Thrace, Bithynia, Asia, Pamphylia, Isauria, Lycaonia, Galatia, Lycia, Cilicia, Cappadocia, Phrygia, Syria, Phoenicia, Judaea, Arabia, Mauritania, Germany, Rhodes, Osrhoene, Mesopotamia. And beyond Karrhai and Edessa we had a great battle with Valerian Caesar. We made prisoner ourselves with our own hands Valerian Caesar and the others, chiefs of that army, the praetorian prefect, senators; we made all prisoners and deported them to Persis. And Syria, Cilicia and Cappadocia we burned, ruined and pillaged.¹³

The unstoppable ascent of Odainat of Palmyra

One emperor was prisoner of the Persians; the second one was left in the West facing wave after wave of barbarians, as well as a whole cascade of usurpations, which – the news of Edessa had barely reached the West – started challenging his rule. The Roman eastern provinces turned overnight into a yawning power vacuum.¹⁴ Gallienus' hands were tied. A campaign in the East to expel the Persians from the province of Mesopotamia was hardly conceivable. As a negotiating partner for Shapur, on the Roman side there was only one officer available, a certain

Fulvius Macrianus, who under Valerian had held the position of an *a rationibus*, being responsible for the war chest. The negotiations in Samosata remained fruitless: Shapur with his band of soldiers pulled through Syria, Cilicia and Cappadocia. Antioch had to surrender a second time to the Persians.

In this situation Macrianus and Battista, who was said to have been Valerian's praetorian prefect,¹⁵ resolved to launch a counteroffensive with the scattered remnants of the Roman army. Whether it was due to their initiative, or to the long since overstretched supply lines of the Persians, Shapur decided to march back towards the Euphrates. The army, very heavily laden with plunder, was just about to cross the river in Commagene – at Zeugma or Samosata – when it was again attacked. This time it was a Palmyrene who led the offensive: Septimius Odaenathus, or Odainat, as he is called in the Palmyrene texts.¹⁶ In Arabic, his name means “little ear.” This Odainat relieved the Persians of their plunder and expelled them from Syria. That he completely exterminated the Persian army, as is speculated by late antique chroniclers, can hardly be accepted.¹⁷

Who was this Odainat, who, in one of the darkest hours of Roman rule in the East, suddenly entered the stage like a *deus ex machina*, and was promptly celebrated like a saviour? What enabled him to inflict an embarrassing defeat on the Euphrates on Shapur, and later to permanently free the Roman eastern provinces from Shapur's threat? The evidence lies in Palmyra's past, though not too far back, only at the time of the Severans. Odainat's family was not one of the truly long-established great families of the oasis metropolis. This would have required a longer tradition of Roman citizenship. In this case he would have had to bear the *nomen gentile* Aelius, or at least Aurelius, might have been perhaps an Ulpius, and might have been able to look back on a family history of 150 years of Roman citizenship. Odainat had been born in the first decades after AD 200, presumably between AD 210 and 220. If this is correct, then it must have been either Odainat's father or his grandfather, who was granted Roman citizenship for the first time, which is indeed several years before Caracalla's *constitutio Antoniniana* of AD 212, though quite late for a family of the Palmyrene upper class.¹⁸ The ancestors of the victor over the Persians are known by name, due to a fragmentary and undated tomb inscription, as well as an honorific inscription from the Great Colonnade. His father was called Hairan, his grandfather Waballat, his great-grandfather Našor.¹⁹ The inscriptions reveal nothing, however, about the social status and possible public functions of these ancestors.

From the presumably Arabic origin of his name one should draw no hasty conclusions either. By the first century BC, Palmyra was a melting pot, taking in people coming from everywhere.²⁰ In the first century AD, all the inhabitants of the oasis regarded themselves ethnically as “Palmyrenes,” while tribal identities continued to lead a tenacious life in the microcosm of the city. There is also hardly any reliable information about Odainat's early career stages. Two Latin sources, the late antique historiographer Festus and the church father Jerome, refer to him as a *decurio*, a member of the local elite belonging to the class of local senators.²¹

The oldest dated epigraphic testimony in which Odainat is mentioned in a bilingual inscription set up by a soldier named Flavianus, member of the *legio*

III Cyrenaica garrisoned at Bostra, in AD 251 for his *patrōn* "Septimius Hairanes, son of Odainat, the *lamprotatos synklētikos, exarchos* of the Palmyrenes."²² In the Palmyrene version of the text, Ḥairan is not referred to as *exarchos*, but as *wrš tdmwr dy*, "head of Tadmur." This title appears again in a similar form (*rš dy tdmwr*) in an undated, monolingual Palmyrene inscription. This document calls the honorand, in this case Odainat himself, not "senator," but only "head of Tadmur," so it is almost certainly older than the honorary inscription for Ḥairan.²³ From AD 252 there is a third inscription, also dedicated to Odainat, who is here referred to as *lamprotatos exarchos*, or *rš dy tdmwr*.²⁴

The interpretation of these inscriptions raises enormous heuristic problems. The title "*exarchos* of the Palmyrenes," or *rš dy tdmwr*, appears here for the first time ever. It is not known from any of the countless older inscriptions, in which political titles and functions are addressed. The term *exarchos* as a title for political functionaries has been in use only from late antiquity. The general meaning of the term is "leader." No similar function is known from any other city in the Greek East. That the Palmyrene *exarchos*, by AD 250, had assumed a practically monarchic position, is confirmed by the Palmyrene equivalent of *exarchos*, *rš* ("head"). The title was apparently hereditary and could be held simultaneously by representatives of different generations in the same family.

It is peculiar that Odainat enters the records as *exarchos* seemingly coming from nowhere. There is no other evidence of possible career stages which might have preceded this function. From an epigraphic point of view, Odainat is practically a dark horse up to the moment when he, as far as we know, suddenly emerges under the limelight of history as "head" of Tadmur. Just as mysterious is his family's ascent within the Roman imperial elite. There is evidence for Ḥairan (AD 251) and his father Odainat (AD 252) holding the honorific title of *lamprotatos*. The Latin equivalent for *lamprotatos* is *vir clarissimus*, and in the imperial period it referred to a senator, or a member of the senatorial order, who was not distinguished by other offices. It is thus clear that Ḥairan and his father have entered the class of the *virī clarissimi*. The question is how someone who obviously did not belong to the venerable upper class in his own city could suddenly rise into the imperial elite. That Odainat and his family do not appear in the epigraphic evidence for centuries can be explained, at a pinch, by the contingencies of conservation. It is, however, more plausible to assume that on the basis of achievements which we do not know of in detail, Odainat performed a meteoric ascent from the second or third rank of Palmyrene society to the top of the city and into the Roman senatorial stand, presumably within a few years up to AD 251.

There is no evidence to prove that the achievements for which Odainat was rewarded in his homeland with a quasi-monarchic absolute power and on the imperial level with great prestige, were of a military nature, but it is likely. First, the man honouring Ḥairan in AD 251 as his *patronus*, was a soldier. Whether Flavianus was also a Palmyrene, is not certain. However, he must have come into contact with Ḥairan in his capacity as a soldier. Therefore, Ḥairan or Odainat had presumably carried military responsibility in a prominent role before AD 251. Second, this matches with the overall military situation in the Near East: in

AD 237, the Persians had invaded large parts of the province of Mesopotamia, and in AD 240/241 conquered Hatra; in AD 243/244 the war between Shapur and Gordian III had raged. From AD 244, a fragile peace had been in place, which had lasted till AD 252.

If Odainat had acquired military merits, then it must have been, most probably, in the period from AD 237 to 244. In those years Hairan was probably too young to be commissioned with a command himself, but we can assume that in the late AD 230s or early 240s, Odainat accomplished something, which proved him to be a military leader, and qualified him for political leadership. He did not enter the stage as the representative of a traditional elite legitimized by their position in the tribal hierarchy,²⁵ as the prominent Palmyrenes of the caravan inscriptions did, but as a charismatic leader winning over people by virtue of an “inner blessing.”²⁶ From a man like Odainat, people had expectations that he would deliver them from the oppressive reality generated by the Persians’ political aspirations and the wars unleashed by them.

With the charismatic ruler Odainat, a new political order was introduced in Palmyra. The monarchy implemented by the *exarchos* in the oasis had nothing in common with the legal order of a Roman *colonia*, as had been established in AD 211/212, and nothing in common with the traditional tribal society, which had dominated the oasis over centuries. Establishing the new political order meant a radical break with tradition, setting Palmyra apart from all other cities of the Roman Empire. Also, Odainat’s family understood the monarchy as a hereditary monopoly of power, otherwise the probably still quite young Hairan would not have held the title of an *exarchos*. The establishment of dynasties in cities belonging to the provinces of their Empire was usually unacceptable to the Romans. This, too, points to exceptional circumstances: the situation almost forced the transfer of power to a military expert. But even the acute emergency situation of the AD 230s and 240s would not in itself have been sufficient to make Palmyra a monarchy and the Septimii Odaenathi the ruling dynasty in the oasis. For this purpose, a social organization was needed, which was compatible with the new power structures, as well as a demographic and military potential, which stood at the disposal of the charismatic leader Odainat. Such presuppositions would not have existed in any other city of the Empire: neither in Athens, nor Carthage, nor in Rome itself.²⁷

The next stage of Odainat’s career is recorded in a whole series of five inscriptions, four of which date to the year AD 257/258. At this stage, they call the *exarchos* and senator *lamprotatos hypatikos*.²⁸ Literally, this corresponds to the Latin rank of a (*clarissimus*) *consularis*, which designates a senator who has held the highest position of the *cursus honorum*, the consulship, thus ranking at the top of the honourable body. In the third century, however, *consularis* was also the official title for governors who administered a province with a legion like Syria Phoenice – regardless of whether they had previously been indeed consuls or just praetors. It is therefore conceivable that by AD 257/258, Odainat had advanced to the position of governor of Syria Phoenice, the province in which Palmyra lay, especially since all dated inscriptions coincide within the

time period of a single year.²⁹ Even if he had held a consulship “only” in the previous years, it would be sufficient proof that in the years between AD 252 and 256, Odainat had made such services to the Romans, that he had attracted the attention of the emperors Valerian and Gallienus. There was enough opportunity to stand out during the fighting of Shapur’s second Roman campaign (AD 252–256), which coincided with this period of time.

It is also interesting that the title of *exarchos*, which was held by Odainat and his son Hairan in the early AD 250s, no longer appears. The inscriptions refer only vaguely to his role in Palmyra. Three of the inscriptions, which were all set up by confraternities (*symposia*) of different trades, call Odainat their *patronus*; a fourth one, set up by the *symposium* of the goldsmiths and silversmiths to honour the *consularis*, calls him “Lord.”³⁰ Does this mean that Odainat merely exercised patronage over some of the Palmyrene trade associations, and no politically dominant function in the city as a whole?³¹ This seems hardly credible. The honorific inscriptions obtained from the AD 250s address, without exception, individuals standing closest to Odainat. This cannot be a coincidence. The family of the *exarchos* and later *consularis* had obviously, at this point, turned the right to use public space for self-representation into a monopoly. It is hard to believe that, in the Palmyra of the AD 250s, any political decision could be made without Odainat giving his consent. If he renounced the title *exarchos*, presumably it was because the new honorific title of *hypatikos*, which is difficult for us to decipher, and which represented a prominent position in the imperial elite, much more prestigious than a local title limited only to Palmyra.³²

Whatever the value attributed to each of the titles held by Odainat, it is clear that, at the end of the AD 250s, the *exarchos*, senator and *consularis* dominated the oasis with his military charisma and was politically unrivalled. In addition, he commanded such an outstanding social prestige that four cases are documented within a single year in which trade associations sought his patronage. Odainat, however, was not only the leading man of his home town, he was also a reliable partner of the Romans in uncertain times, who had probably proved himself successful in high-ranking military positions more than once. The emperors Valerian and Gallienus had rewarded his commitment first by accepting him as a senator (from AD 252) into the Roman elite, and, a few years later, as *consularis*, granting him access to the inner circle of the senatorial aristocracy. Presumably this was connected with his nomination as governor of his home province and a military command.

Odainat had scarcely obtained his political key position in Palmyra, before he was anxious to pass it dynastically to the next generation of his family. To this end, he had his son Hairan, who bore the name of his grandfather, take part in honouring ceremonies in the public space early on. The oldest preserved inscription with a senatorial title (AD 251) is for Hairan, not for Odainat. Thus, the victor’s charisma was transmitted to the son, who was presumably very young at the time. Assuming that Odainat was born between AD 210 and 220, then Hairan, who in an undated but later inscription is called “Herodianos,”³³ cannot have been born long before AD 240, being thus in AD 251, not much

more than ten years old. The *Historia Augusta* reports that Odainat had been married twice and had a son named Herodes from his first marriage.³⁴ This “Herodes” can with certainty be identified with Hairan-Herodianos, who is well documented in the epigraphic record of the AD 250s, but then suddenly disappears from AD 263. It is therefore to be assumed that Odainat’s eldest son died around, or shortly after, AD 263.

At this date Odainat had already married for the second time. The second wife of the *consularis* was called Zenobia, and she was destined to become the most famous of all Palmyrenes, as well as one of the most fascinating women of antiquity. Little is known about her family background,³⁵ presumably, however, she belonged to the Palmyrene upper class, otherwise she would not have been socially equal to Odainat, who was already politically dominant. Zenobia is with certainty the mother of Waballat, for whom there is plenty of epigraphic and numismatic evidence, and who, as a teenager, would play a role in the drama around Palmyra. Waballat (latinized as Vaballathus), means “gift of Allat.” Since through *interpretatio Graeca* Allat was equated with Athena, the Greek version of the name was Athenodoros. Around AD 260, when Waballat was born, such Palmyrene-Greek double names had long been established in the oasis.³⁶ Even Waballat’s older half-brother Hairan had had a Greek name. Onomastically, both brothers continued a family tradition: Hairan was named after Odainat’s father, Waballat after his grandfather. The *Historia Augusta* mentions two other sons of Zenobia, Timolaus and Herennianus. However, their existence is not supported by epigraphic or numismatic evidence. Presumably, these are inventions of the author, who seldom hesitates when it comes to delivering a creative interpretation of history.³⁷

The lion of Tadmur

In the summer of AD 260, when Odainat defeated the Persians at the Euphrates, he was undisputedly the sole ruler of Palmyra, and one of the prominent representatives of the Roman imperial elite in the eastern provinces threatened by Shapur. Possibly he had served the emperors as governor of Syria Phoenice, and maybe he still did. Odainat was as much representative of the Roman Empire, as he was for his own city. With regard to Persians and the war, both interests were in complete harmony: Shapur had to be defeated, the danger had to be averted from the Roman provinces and their cities, and peace was to be regained, especially with regard to the Palmyrene long-distance trade. The victory at the Euphrates marks an important stage on the way to this goal – no less, and no more either.

Besides Odainat, there were two other players in the Roman Near East in the summer of AD 260: the officer and *a rationibus* Fulvius Macrianus and Ballista, who had defeated the Persians in Cilicia. The *Historia Augusta* reports that Ballista had declared in a war council that Macrianus should seize power in the East and fill the power vacuum. Macrianus, however, had turned this down, referring to his advanced age and bad health, proposing instead his two sons, the younger Macrianus and Quietus.³⁸ Initially, the two usurpers found broad

acceptance in the eastern provinces, from Asia Minor to Syria and Egypt, as evidence from the area proves.³⁹ In the spring of AD 261, the older and the younger Macrianus moved westward to seek a decision against Gallienus, while Quietus and Ballista, who had been appointed by Quietus as praetorian prefect, set up their headquarters in the Syrian city of Emesa – that is, in the immediate vicinity of Palmyra. Probably still in late spring AD 261, the two Macriani were defeated in Thrace by Gallienus' general Aureolus. Zonaras reports that Gallienus then entrusted Odainat of Palmyra to launch an offensive against Quietus and Ballista in Emesa.⁴⁰ Odainat defeated the two near Emesa, and thus put a stop to the rebellion against Gallienus, which had been collapsing everywhere after the defeat of the Macriani. By October AD 261, Gallienus was recognized throughout the eastern provinces. The really strong man there, however, was Odainat.

Gallienus had no choice but to accept the power of the Palmyrene in the East. Odainat, in any case, had always remained loyal. There is no indication that he ever actively supported the Macriani, Quietus and Ballista. Thus the Roman emperor made a virtue out of necessity, and provided Odainat with titles and official powers, which granted him a far-reaching remit of action in the East, but at the same time bound him to Gallienus. Apparently still in the summer of AD 260, the Emperor appointed Odainat *dux*.⁴¹ From the third century AD onwards, the title referred to commanders who were appointed ad hoc in times of crisis, were responsible for several provinces and had the command over large military units above the level of legion. With the title, Odainat received the supreme command over the entire eastern frontier, including all Roman forces garrisoned there. De facto, he was thus entrusted with the war against Shapur's Persians.

Soon after, probably from AD 261, the military power of command was complemented by a special administrative function, whose Latin name seems to have been *corrector totius Orientis*. The governors of the war-affected eastern provinces, who were responsible for the civil administration, were now accountable to the Palmyrene, who had to ensure a rapid restoration of the devastated infrastructure and the provision of the population.⁴² Combined, both offices formally constituted an *imperium maius*, which went far beyond the *imperium* of a governor, actually making its owner the emperor's representative in a substantial part of the Empire. The extent of Odainat's area of jurisdiction and the existence or not of formal borders is beyond our knowledge. At least Mesopotamia and Syria were part of the area, certainly the neighbouring provinces of Asia Minor (Cilicia, Cappadocia) too; presumably Syria Palaestina, formerly Judea, and Arabia, the Nabataean territory annexed by Trajan; perhaps the western half of Asia Minor too, as far as to the straits.⁴³

In Gallienus' view, the transfer of such powers to Odainat was the much lesser evil. Firstly, civilian administration and military command were thus in the hands of a man who had already proved his expertise, and since his victory at the Euphrates, enjoyed an extremely high reputation in the eastern provinces. In principle, this meant a return to the task sharing which had existed until AD 260 between Gallienus and his father Valerian. Odainat's sphere of responsibility was the East; Gallienus himself took care of the West, which was also

afflicted by war. Secondly, with this action he made clear that the main source of Odainat's legitimacy was still the Roman emperor and the legal order represented by him – and not the authority of his family in Palmyra or the charisma of the victor over the Persians.

At least latently, these three grounds of legitimacy were in competition with each other. That between the Mediterranean and the Tigris considerable expectations of salvation were pinned on Odainat is shown by an obscure, though clear, text from a probably Jewish, but at any rate Near Eastern background. The thirteenth so-called Sibylline Oracle is a pseudo-prophecy written in hexameters, whose subject are the occurrences around Shapur's Roman campaigns.⁴⁴ The first part (lines 7–154) of the Oracle deals with the events between Gordian III's Persian war and the repulsion of the Persians before Emesa (AD 253). The second part (lines 155–232) begins with Shapur's victory over Valerian (AD 260). This prophecy starts with a pessimistic tone:

[. . .] even then the stately bull [Valerian],
That digs the earth with his hoofs and stirs up
The dust with his two horns, shall many ills
Upon a dark-skinned reptile [Shapur] perpetrate –
which draws a trail with his scales; and besides,
Himself shall perish [battle of Edessa, AD 260].⁴⁵

Then a “fair-horned stag [Macrianus senior] will appear hungry upon the mountains,” which will exterminate the “venom-shedding beasts [the Persians].” “The he-goat that sideways moves along [Ballista]” and “the most mighty venom-shedding beast [Shapur]” will be crushed by a “dread and fearful lion [. . .], sent from the sun [Odainat].” He, the lion, is followed by glory; he will rule over the Romans and the Persians will be weak.⁴⁶ Odainat, the lion sent from the sun, is followed by fame: nothing reveals better than this passage from a fictitious prophecy, how many hopes were pinned on the Palmyrene in Rome's heavily tested eastern provinces.

Odainat's absolute power was increasingly conflicting with the other grounds of legitimacy, namely with his Roman legal titles, and this is hinted at by an undated Greek inscription, reporting Odainat's proclamation as a king:

To the King of Kings Septimios Odainat, who received the *basileia* by the Orontes, crowned for a victory over the Persians, (offered by) Ioulios Aurelius Septimios Ouorodes and Ioulios Aurelios [. . .], procurator [*epitropos*] of the lordship [*desponia*], *centenarius*, both *stratēgoi* of the *illustris colonia* [*lamprotatē koloneia*].⁴⁷

The reading “by the Orontes” is not quite certain; what is certain, though, is that Odainat did assume the title of king. This took place during the *stratēgeia* of Worod (Ouorodes), which can presumably be dated from July AD 263 to the spring of 264.⁴⁸ Odainat received the royal title in the version used by the Sasanian kings,

as well as by the former rulers of the Parthian and Achaemenid Empires: *basileus basileiōn*, “King of Kings.” The title betrays Odainat’s self-perception: on the one hand, he expresses the at least theoretical claim of becoming Shapur’s successor as ruler over the East. On the other hand, the dynastic character reclaimed by Odainat for his reign becomes evident. It was only with the acquisition of the royal title that the Palmyrene made it visible to all that he intended to pass on his power to the hands of a successor, which was, of course, his son. The *Historia Augusta* reports, quite credibly, that Odainat had assumed the royal title together with his son Hairan.⁴⁹ The dynastic claim of the Palmyrene had to collide sooner or later with the constitutional prerogatives of the Roman Emperor.

The above inscription explicitly states Odainat’s victory over the Persians as the motive for his proclamation as king. This does not relate to the fighting by the Euphrates, but rather military achievements, which by far eclipsed the skirmish of the summer of AD 260. The chronology of the two Persian wars led by Odainat between AD 262 and 267, can barely be reconstructed on the basis of the late antique sources, which are scarcely reliable.⁵⁰ What the Palmyrene aimed to achieve with his undertakings, and what kinds of resources he employed against the Persians remain largely a mystery as well. A rough outline can still be reconstructed:⁵¹ Odainat started with re-conquering (AD 262) the parts of the province of Mesopotamia still held by the Persians, including Karrhai and Nisibis, destroying the latter. Apparently, his army moved southwards at the Ḥābūr, then along the Euphrates into Bayblonia. There, the city of Nehardea was destroyed, which hosted a significant Jewish community, as well as being an important trading hub, maybe in competition with Palmyra. From here Odainat followed the old royal canal to the Tigris, where he reached Ktesiphon, the winter residence of the Persian kings. Odainat besieged the town, but failed to conquer it. Nevertheless, the action was a success: only two years after the disaster of Edessa, the Palmyrenes had carried the war into the heart of the Sasanian Empire, threatening Shapur in his core country. Loaded with plunder, they returned to Syria, where Odainat, whose fame had grown almost boundless, received the royal title.

The newly created king otherwise avoided anything that Gallienus could have challenged. In the recaptured province of Mesopotamia, he restored the authority of the Roman emperor. The mint in Antioch went on as usual, minting coins with Gallienus’ image. For Odainat’s victory, the emperor in Rome assumed the name *Persicus Maximus*, while the Palmyrene is even said to have handed over to Gallienus the nobles among the captives for a triumphal procession.⁵² The coins minted in Antioch did not delay in taking up the political events. They celebrated the victory, proclaimed the vengeance taken on the Persians, and boasted legends such as: MARS VICTOR, (“Mars the victorious”), MARS VLTOR (“Mars the avenger”), ROMAE AETERNAE (“to eternal Rome”), VICTORIA AVG[usti] (“the victory of Augustus”), PAX FVNDATA (“peace is established”).⁵³ Peace prevailed not only on the border with the Persians, but inside as well: while Gallienus had to fight against numerous usurpers in the West, it remained calm in the East.

What was Odainat expecting to achieve with such an ambitious campaign against the Sasanians and their Mesopotamian core land? Was his intention essentially

defensive? Was it just a matter of weakening the Persians and creating a rampart for the defence of the Roman provinces? Was he out for plunder? Or for revenge? Or did the Palmyrene pursue far more ambitious plans? Was he aiming at the permanent annexation of Mesopotamia? The adoption of the king's title in its Persian version suggests that Odainat pursued great plans in the East. The title acted as a promise to all those who were dissatisfied with the Persian rule, and to those who longed for the autonomy they had once enjoyed under the Arsacids. The war in Babylonia was possibly part of an even more ambitious plan: to completely get rid of the Sasanians and make Palmyra the powerhouse of a new eastern empire. Then at the latest, the Palmyrenes would also have come into conflict with Rome. Adventurous as such ideas may seem, the meteoric rise of one city to imperial grandeur would not have been unprecedented in the Near East.⁵⁴

A remarkable footnote to the episode is provided by a newly found Sabaeen inscription from the Jabal Riyām site in Yemen.⁵⁵ It complements the historiographical texts from the West with the outside perspective of the Far South. It is the votive inscription of a certain Ḥayū^{um} or Ḥayū'athtar to the goddess Ta'lab Riyām, the chief deity of his tribe, in gratitude for a happy home return. Probably shortly after AD 260, the author went on a diplomatic mission to the "land of the north." He lists a number of territories through which his journey has led him. Characteristic is the formula "Land of the x" for the designation of areas. Here geography is based on ethnic and genealogical, rather than primarily spatial criteria. Besides "the land of the Tanūḥ" and "the land of the Laḥm^{um}," two tribes which would go on making a name for themselves in late antiquity, his path also led him through the regions of the "Tadmur^{um}" and the "Rūmān," the Tadmureans and the Romans. It is worth noting that Odainat's Palmyra was perceived by the envoy from South Arabia as an ethnic group separate from Rome, and thus, perhaps, as a sovereign political force as well. This is also true of the Nabataeans ("Nabaṭ^{um}") of the province of Arabia, where the long tradition of the autonomous kingdom probably influenced the traveller's perception in this case. The separate listing of the Palmyrenes gives way to all kinds of speculations: was the city on its way to becoming a power centre in its own right? Was Palmyra perhaps exactly for that reason the destination of the diplomat from South Arabia?

Another scenario is also conceivable. In the centuries between Germanicus' visit in Palmyra and the takeover of the Sasanians in the East, the Palmyrenes had been beneficiaries of an exceptional political stability: 194 years of peace stood against only 15 years of war. The relative peace was over in AD 227, when Ardashir finally prevailed against the Arsacids. Of the 40 years between AD 228 and 267, 23 were years of war, with only 17 years of peace. The age of blood and iron started by Ardashir was a deadly danger to the business interests of the Palmyrenes between the Mediterranean and the Persian Gulf. From the period in question, only three caravan inscriptions have been preserved, all three dating from the years of peace: AD 247, AD 257/258, AD 266. Presumably, the continuing hostilities of the third century hit Palmyra's trade much harder than the infrequent campaigns of the second. Why then were they so much more dangerous and damaging for the Palmyrenes than all the previous wars? The answer is obvious: from

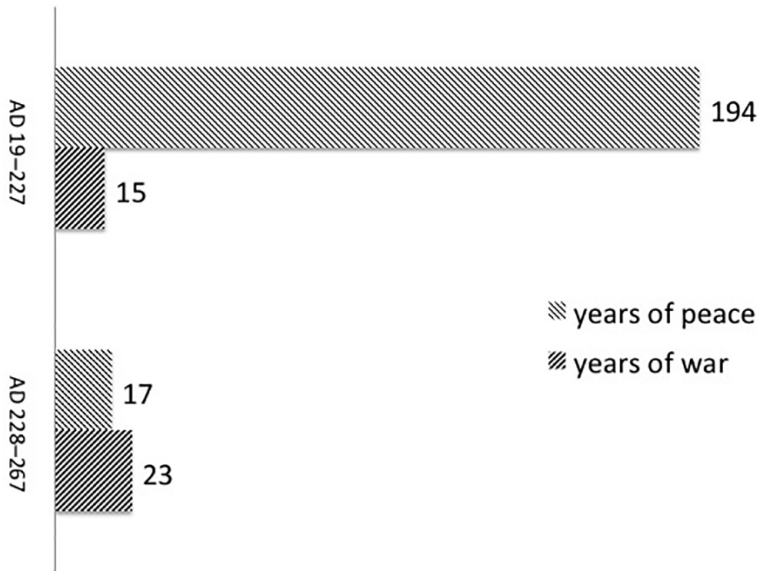


Figure 7.4 War and peace in Syria and Mesopotamia, AD 19-267

the point of view of the Parthians, the Palmyrenes were trustworthy, for they were regarded as the representatives of a third party, not so much as subjects of the Roman emperor. Trust being the hardest currency in any economic relationship, this allowed the traders to operate their business even in times of political instability. With the Sasanians, the situation was altogether different. They had to do with citizens of the *colonia* Palmyra, which even possessed the *ius Italicum*, regarding them as loyal Roman citizens, who were not to be trusted in the slightest. In the absence of trust, the gateway had been locked and remained so, at least in times of war, which from 224 onwards, were all too frequent. With his campaigns in Mesopotamia, Odainat may well have pursued the strategic aim of unlocking the gate again and reopening the trade route to the Persian Gulf for the caravans of Palmyra. Possibly, Odainat simply pursued the relatively limited goal of intimidating the Persians into reopening their Empire to the Palmyrene long-distance trade as it used to be.

However, the far-reaching campaigns may also have been the expression of a the-flag-follows-the-trade policy, which aimed at submitting the caravan routes all the way down to the Persian Gulf to Palmyra's political control. If anybody was in a position to pursue an economic agenda, it was certainly Odainat. For that matter, political and economic driving forces need not be mutually exclusive. Odainat may well have combined his safety doctrine for the long-distance trade with high-flying plans for himself and his family.

Whatever Odainat's plans were, we will never know for sure. In AD 267, after several years of peace, the Palmyrene started a second Persian war. Again he

reached the walls of Ktesiphon, besieging the town. But then the Palmyrenes retreated as suddenly as they had come. What had happened? After the victory of the Gothic king Kniva over Decius in AD 251, not only the south of the Balkan Peninsula, but northern Asia Minor as well had come under pressure from migratory tribes. In their hunt for plunder, Goths, Heruli and other tribes repeatedly crossed the Black Sea, raiding coastal cities in Anatolia. This was also the case in the spring of AD 267, when “Scythians” landed at Herakleia Pontike in Bithynia et Pontus.⁵⁶ The danger from the presumed Heruli was deemed so great, that Odainat decided to break off the siege of Ktesiphon and to rush to Bithynia, where the barbarians had already left (autumn AD 267).

A few months later, Odainat was dead. Had the *consularis*, *dux*, *corrector* and king been murdered? Had he become the victim of a coup in his own camp? Were greedy relatives behind it all? Was Gallienus himself the mastermind behind the assassination, because he wanted to get rid of a dangerous rival? Or was it just a banal hunting accident which killed the victor over the Persians? The evidence from the sources is as puzzling, as contradictory.⁵⁷ Not even the time and place of Odainat’s death are certain: Bithynia is to be considered just as much as Emesa, which is named by Zosimos.⁵⁸ From the late summer of AD 267/268, there is no reference of any kind to Odainat in the sources. The strong man of the Roman East was probably no longer alive when the year AD 268 started, which was also to bring death to Gallienus.

Zenobia Augusta

Odainat’s death created a problem, which resulted from the competing sources of legitimacy of his rule. From the point of view of the Roman central government, the death of the *consularis*, *dux* and *corrector totius Orientis* obviously meant that all titles and special powers were extinguished with him and fell back to the emperor. After all, he, the *princeps*, was the source of any kind of legitimacy for the Palmyrene. This was the Roman legal position. It came into an irresolvable conflict with the conclusions drawn from the events in Palmyra, where it was thought that Odainat had established a hereditary rule, which must, as a matter of course, pass over to the next generation. This interpretation was based on the title “King of Kings,” which was adopted by Odainat around AD 263, and which unequivocally affirmed the dynastic claim of his family. Kinship ties had always been the cement of Palmyrene society. Odainat was quite consistent with the local traditions when systematically preparing his sons for the succession: first Hāiran / Herodianos, then, after his early death, Waballat, the son he had with Zenobia.

The dynastic succession was therefore perfectly legitimate from the traditional point of view. In addition, the king and his family could boast the military successes against the Persians and the protection of the Roman provinces, both of which had been Odainat’s personal merit. His involvement in the wars of the AD 240s and 250s had established his reputation, the victory at the Euphrates in the late summer of AD 260 had considerably increased his fame, the ventures deep into Persian territory up to Ktesiphon had finally made him a messianic saviour.

Odainat passed on this charisma to his sons. In the genealogically structured society of the oasis, its consolidation as a “hereditary charisma” was anything but surprising.⁵⁹ The dynasty founded by Odainat and his descendants involved charismatic and traditional components of authority. The contradiction between the Palmyrene point of view and the position of the central government invoking Roman law could not be reconciled.

At first, however, the conflict was not severe. The Roman central government simply lacked means and ways to assert its claim on undivided sovereignty.⁶⁰ In the summer of AD 268, Gallienus had to deal with another invasion of Goths and Herules in the Balkans. The Germans, who had entered the Aegean Sea via the Black Sea, succeeded in taking Athens, before Gallienus could attack and defeat them by the river Nestos (Mesta in Bulgaria). The victory gave the Emperor only a short breathing space, for soon after that, news of the usurpation in Milan by Aureolus, his most capable general, reached him. The emperor urgently marched his army against the northern Italian city, besieging it. During the siege he fell victim to a murder. His successor, Claudius II, called “Gothicus,” won a spectacular victory over, allegedly, 50,000 Goths in AD 269 near Naissus (Niš). Largely responsible for the victory was the cavalry general Lucius Domitius Aurelianus. After he had died during an epidemic in September AD 270, Claudius was succeeded, after a short interlude under his brother Quintillus, by this Aurelian.

Aurelian took over the rule in an Empire which was largely consolidated militarily. The threat of the Goths and other Germanic tribes in the Rhine, Danube and Black Sea regions had been mitigated by a series of victories since Gallienus’ time. The same had happened in the East, where Shapur’s Persian threat to the eastern provinces had been averted by Odainat. This was precisely the sore point for Aurelian. The successful war of defence, which had claimed all the resources of the Empire, had involved, in addition to the central government, regional forces as well; in the East, the Palmyrenes in the West, the emperors of the Gallic Empire, where in the catastrophic year AD 260, an autonomous sphere of power had established itself. The usurper Postumus had been proclaimed emperor in Cologne, but then instead of turning against Gallienus in Rome, had gone on fighting against the Germanic tribes pushing themselves over the Rhine. Gallienus, who for his part had far more pressing problems than Postumus, was forced to accept the factual independence of the Gallic provinces, including Britain and for some time Spain.⁶¹

In principle, in the AD 260s and early 270s, the Roman Empire was divided into three largely autonomous spheres of power. In practice, however, the division amounted to the regionalization of military, but also administrative, responsibilities. Odainat and the Palmyrenes committed themselves to the protection of the frontier in the East, Postumus and the succeeding “Gallic” emperors Victorinus and Tetricus did it in the north-west, on the Rhine, Gallienus and his successors Claudius and Aurelian did it on the Danube. The setup was not dissimilar to the division of responsibilities between Valerian and Gallienus, except that in AD 253 it was the result of a strategic calculation, while in AD 260 it was due to the constraints of an acute crisis. Although all three parts of the Empire were structurally

and functionally alike, the legitimacy constructions supporting their rulers were fundamentally different. Gallienus' rule rested on dynastic continuity and on the fact that he was the *princeps* recognized by the Roman Senate; after all, the capital was located in his sphere of power. The reigns of Odainat and Postumus, as well as of their respective successors, were based on military achievements. But while Postumus was a usurper, who neither acknowledged Gallienus, nor was recognized by him, Odainat's position in the East depended on the titles and powers conferred to him by the Emperor. From a Roman point of view, only the king's title was usurped, otherwise the *dux* and *corrector totius Orientis* fitted comfortably into the Roman legal order.

This arrangement ceased to exist in AD 270 for two reasons. First, Odainat was dead, so, according to the Roman understanding, there was no longer a *corrector* and *dux*, and second, with the German threat mitigated, the prime reason had disappeared for Rome to keep quiet, and to acquiesce in the usurpation, as the Emperor saw it, of the still underage Waballat. After Odainat's assassination, he had probably immediately assumed the titles of "King of Kings" and *corrector totius Orientis*, as can be inferred from the undated, bilingual inscription on a milestone of the road leading from Palmyra to Emesa. The Palmyrene version with the supplemented text reads as follows:

For [welfare] and [victory of] Septimius
Waballat Athenodorus, [most brilliant] King of Kings
And restorer of the East, son of Sept[imi]us [Odainat, king] of the kings, and for
The welfare of Septimia Bat-Zabbai, most brilliant queen, mother of the King
of Kings
Daughter of Antiochos, Mile 14.⁶²

The inscription calls Waballat *mlk mlk* ('King of Kings') and *w'pnrt* ('restorer') *dy mndh' klh* ('of the East'), which is the Palmyrene expression for *corrector totius Orientis*, as well as *nhyrt* ('most brilliant'), the corresponding term for Greek *lamprotatos* and Latin *clarissimus*. In the Greek version, Zenobia is said to be a *lamprotatē basilissa*, a "most brilliant queen." Waballat has taken over the title of a king because of the dynastic principle, which was rooted in Palmyra, and which was converted by Odainat into a monarchy. That Waballat's mother bears the title of a queen is due to the youth of the new king. In AD 268, Waballat probably was not yet ten years of age.

What is striking, is the adherence to Roman titles, albeit in a quite peculiar way. That here the adjective "brilliant" is used as an attribute to the nouns *mlk* ('king') or *basilissa* ('queen'), is, by Roman standards, a downright paradoxical new creation of the Palmyrenes. The use of terms such as *clarissimus* and, above all, *corrector*, however, shows that such titles had legitimizing power in Palmyra. Zenobia, who unquestionably must have devised the arrangement, was anxious to secure for herself and her son a position within the framework of the imperial legal order. The only way to achieve this was to use titles which made her and her son Roman office holders, thus formalizing their status in the social hierarchy.



Figure 7.5 AE Tetradrachm of the emperor Aurelian, AD 270, Alexandria. Obverse: AKΛΔOM AVPHAIANOC CEB / L A, laureate draped bust of Aurelian right. Reverse: IACO VABALLAΘOC AΘHN V AVT, laureate draped bust of Waballat right. BMC Alexandria 311

It was within this order that Zenobia saw her place, not outside it. That according to Roman terms the function of a *corrector* could not be inherited from father to son, was considered irrelevant in Palmyra and in the world surrounding it. What mattered here was that such titles, whatever they might mean, buttressed the authority of those who held them.

Zenobia pursued this path persistently, going even further than her deceased husband. Like him, she also avoided the open rebellion against Rome. The mint in Antioch went on minting nominals with the emperors' image; in an inscription set up in Tyre, a governor of Syria Phoenice mentions only the emperor; only a few milestones, such as the one found between Palmyra and Emesa, bear the names of the Palmyrene rulers.⁶³ Many of the governors in the East had apparently refused, after Odainat's death, to recognize Zenobia and Waballat as his successors. The next logical step for the queen was to enforce the authority of her son as *corrector* – if necessary, by force. Presumably in the spring of AD 270, Palmyrene troops occupied the province of Arabia, where they defeated the *legio III Cyrenaica*, which was garrisoned there. After that, in the summer of the same year, the Palmyrenes marched towards Egypt, conquering it in two campaigns, in the summer and in the autumn of AD 270. At the end of November, only a few months after Aurelian's accession, all of Egypt was under Palmyra's control, including its capital Alexandria, which minted nominals featuring Aurelian with nimbus wreath and Waballat with diadem (Figure 7.5). Only a month later, in November, the same mint produced coins featuring Waballat as *imperator* (Figure 7.6). Still a month later, Egyptian papyri were dated after the years on the throne of the *vir consularis rex imperator dux Romanorum*. *Imperator* here followed as a title, instead of preceding the proper name as *praenomen*, as was used by the Roman emperors.



Figure 7.6 AE Antoninianus of the emperor Aurelian, AD 270, Antioch. Obverse: IMP C AVRELIANVS AVG / A, draped bust of Aurelian with radiate crown right. Reverse: VABALLATHVS VCRIMDR, laureate draped bust of Waballat right. RIC 381 = BN 1238–1240

Coins from Alexandria and Antioch bear the same title, abbreviated to VCRIMDR. From March AD 271, the legend was slightly changed again: this was now deemed the fourth year of Waballat, contrasted with the first year of Aurelian, who held the title of Augustus, but was Waballat's junior in years of service.⁶⁴ In the same year, Zenobia started to invade western Asia Minor, which was needed for the territorial consolidation of the Palmyrene sphere of power. Resistance here was too strong, though, and the Palmyrenes did not get beyond Galatia. Western Anatolia remained in the hands of Aurelian, for whom alone coins were minted here. Nevertheless, in the first year of Aurelian's rule, Zenobia had largely recaptured the territory in which Odainat had exercised power as *dux*.⁶⁵

The occupation of Egypt and the province of Arabia raises questions about other motives of the Palmyrenes. Both provinces were hubs of long-distance trade: Arabia with Petra as the end point of the so-called incense road to the south of the Arabian Peninsula, the Nile province as an interface for the maritime trade with India over the Red Sea. The Red Sea trade had priority for the Palmyrenes, since they had been engaged in it for a long time.⁶⁶ People from the Syrian city had settled down on the Nile as traders. Even Egyptians without Palmyrene origin must have seen the advantages of an extension of Palmyrene influence.⁶⁷ Literary sources mention a certain Timagenes, an Egyptian, who had built up a sort of fifth column for Zenobia on the Nile.⁶⁸ It is quite possible that trade interests played a role here. Under the influence of the wars in Mesopotamia since AD 227, Egypt must have gained considerable significance for the Palmyrenes. The Nile province, however, was probably more valuable as a political asset. Anyone who had the say here, could prevent the supply of grain to Rome and Italy, thus having quite an impact on every ruler in the West.

For the emperors in distant Rome, neither the illegitimate sporting of Roman titles, nor the claim of an autonomous sphere of power within the frame of the Empire was a trivial offence. As early as in AD 268, after Odainat's death, Gallienus had apparently made preparations for an oriental campaign, whose first target would have been Palmyra.⁶⁹ The plans could not be carried out, since Aureolus started his usurpation, the West sunk once again into civil war, and Gallienus was murdered. When he assumed power, in September AD 270, Aurelian instead found a situation which allowed him considerably more scope for action than all his predecessors since Gallienus had had. The Goths had been defeated, the civil war banned. Aurelian spent the winter of AD 270/271 in Rome, where he laid the foundation stone for the new city wall, which still bears his name. In AD 271, he waged war against the tribes of the Juthungi, Sarmatians and Vandals, who had threatened northern Italy for years, and against the remainders of the Goths in the Balkans. He set up his winter residence in Byzantium, (later Constantinople).⁷⁰

At this point, Aurelian felt strong enough to start the war against Palmyra. He concentrated forces in Thrace and prepared the crossing of the straits. In the early spring of AD 272, the offensive began. Aurelian landed in Bithynia, which previously had successfully resisted Zenobia, and by way of Chalkedon, Nikomedeia and Nikaia, reached Ankyra in Galatia, which was controlled by the Palmyrenes. He could easily take Ankyra. The city of Tyana in Cappadocia was besieged and taken by storm. With a significant gesture, Aurelian showed mildness, *clementia*, to its inhabitants, reasonably hoping to induce the fall of Zenobia and her clique in Syria. Crossing Cilicia, the Roman army continued its march to Syria. By April, the army had reached Issos, where Alexander the Great had triumphed over the Persian Dareios in 333 BC. Behind Issos rises the Amanus, with the pass of the Syrian Gate connecting Cilicia and the Orontes valley.

On the other side of the mountain, Zenobia was waiting for the Romans. She had positioned the most powerful parts of her army in the plain to defeat Aurelian's soldiers, who were exhausted by the long march, in open battle. That the conflict with the Roman Augustus was inevitable, had long been understood by Zenobia. While Aurelian's troops were still marching through Asia Minor, Waballat had been proclaimed Augustus in Syria. *Imperator Caesar Lucius Iulius Aurelius Septimius Vaballathus Athenodorus Persicus maximus Arabicus maximus Adiabenicus maximus pius felix invictus Augustus* was now the title of the usurper, as has been recorded on several milestones.⁷¹ With this act, Waballat took for himself his father's victories over the Persians (*Persicus*, *Adiabenicus*), showing off, at the same time, his own victory over the governor of a Roman province (*Arabicus*). Imperator was now the *praenomen*, the titles *rex*, *vir consularis* and *dux Romanorum* having disappeared from the formula. In addition, the mint of Antioch minted nominals for *Imperator Caesar Vhabalathus Augustus* and *Septimia Zenobia Augusta*. The temporal coincidence with Aurelian's offensive is unmistakable: here a mother and son speak out, facing the western Augustus as equals, as rulers in their own right, though in control of only a part of the Empire (Figure 7.7). With this usurpation, if it can be termed as such,⁷² the



Figure 7.7 AE Antoninianus of Zenobia, AD 272, Antioch. Obverse: S ZENOBIA AVG. Diademed draped bust of Zenobia right. Revers: IVNO REGINA, Iuno standing left, with patera in her right, sceptre in her left hand, peacock to her feet, star in the left field. MIR 47 360b/0 = BN 1267a

claim to legitimacy and the self-representation of the Palmyrene rulers shifted completely into the Roman sphere. Neither the coinage's visual language, nor his title could distinguish Waballat from any other pretender. And yet, the occurrence is inadequately described by the term "usurpation."

Roman usurpations always proceed according to the same scenario. A ruling emperor loses his authority through political or military failures. The commander of an army garrisoned at Rome's long frontiers claims the imperial purple for himself, usually through acclamation by the soldiers. As a rule, the usurper relies on his own victories, which the incumbent lacks. As soon as the usurpation is declared, civil war is inevitable. Having once claimed the principate, there is no going back, so the war is to death. The armies of both claimants fall on each other, fighting till one is defeated, unless an army or a group of soldiers pull the emergency brake, murdering their own candidate to avert a sure defeat. The scenario can be complicated by the temporal overlapping of a series of usurpations, in principle, however, it is invariably the same.⁷³

The events of the year AD 272 differ in significant points from the standard scenario of a Roman usurpation. First, Waballat and Zenobia do not challenge an emperor whose authority is disintegrating, but Aurelian, the victor over the Goths, the rescuer of Italy and the Balkans. The claim to the imperial purple thus does not issue from a position of strength, but rather as an act of defence, indeed as a desperate act. Second, Waballat does not rely on the prestige of his own victory, but on the dynastic principle and the charisma inherited from his father. Third, Zenobia and Waballat already consider themselves as the legitimate rulers of the East, who are challenged by Aurelian. Fourth, Zenobia and Waballat do not represent an army, but a power sphere within the Roman Empire, which has

been autonomous for two generations, and which owes its existence to the developments going on since AD 260. That Palmyra can successfully take on military responsibility in the Roman Near East is due, finally, to the special social biotope of the oasis, which will be discussed in detail elsewhere.⁷⁴

If Zenobia's and Waballat's claim to the imperial purple was not a classical usurpation, what was it then? Though seemingly not quite satisfactory, the answer must be, it was the consistent decision of a ruler at the end of a chain of contingent events, which were out of her control. Odainat's death left Zenobia only one choice, to pursue his political inheritance. The diverging legal conceptions on Odainat's succession entailed irreconcilable cause for conflict. The political consolidation in the West would let the Emperor in Rome take action sooner or later. And Zenobia could not answer the escalation initiated by Aurelian in any other way than by counter-escalation. This does not make her an anti-Roman rebel, or even as much as a pioneer of an Arab nationalism⁷⁵ projected into the distant past, similar to the likes of Boudicca or Arminius. She is, rather, a tragic prisoner of history, who could brightly manoeuvre, however, on the political chessboard laid out by Rome.

Last act

In May AD 272, Aurelian's military force crossed the Syrian Gate, reached the Orontes valley, and stood before Antioch. The Romans tried to bypass the Palmyrene army in the east, but they were attacked by Zenobia's heavy cavalry. In a cavalry battle near the small town of Immai, 40 km east of Antioch, Aurelian's light cavalry defeated the heavily armoured *clibanarii* of the Palmyrenes. The bulk of Zenobia's army withdrew behind the walls of Antioch. On the next day, however, it left the Orontes metropolis and took position in Emesa. Here Zenobia wanted to beat Aurelian by mobilizing what remained of her forces. Zosimos describes the scene offering itself to the eyes of Aurelian's soldiers when they reached Emesa after having conquered, without a fight, Apameia, Larissa and Arethusa: "Thereupon, on the plain before Emesa, an army of up to 70,000 men, consisting of Palmyrenes and their allies, was seen."⁷⁶

While Aurelian and Zenobia faced each other in Emesa, a large portion of the territories conquered by her had already broken away from Palmyra. In June, Egypt had already resumed minting coins for Aurelian. Even before that, the emperor had sent officers to Mesopotamia and Arabia to ensure order in his interest. In early summer, when her makeshift army was defeated by Aurelian at Emesa, Zenobia gave up the city. She left the war chest in Emesa, and took flight to Palmyra. The last act taking place in the oasis is cloaked by such a dense web of legends and half-truths that it is hardly possible to distil a plausible account from the motley stories surrounding it. After the victory at Emesa, Aurelian's army set out for the arduous march eastward through the desert. The Romans presumably reached Palmyra in the midsummer of AD 272. The sources conform with the information that Aurelian besieged Palmyra, and that it was unrelentingly defended by its inhabitants. According to Zosimos, when the situation had

become hopeless, Zenobia rode out of the city towards the Euphrates to persuade the Persians to intervene. She was reached and overwhelmed, however, by the Roman cavalry. After that, a heated debate broke out in Palmyra, over whether to capitulate or not. Finally, the faction opting for peace succeeded. Aurelian was indulgent to the defeated Palmyra.⁷⁷

The *Historia Augusta* and the anonymous *Continuator Dionis* report that during the siege, Aurelian and Zenobia exchanged letters to negotiate the surrender of the city. Zenobia curtly dismissed the demand to surrender, so Aurelian took Palmyra by assault.⁷⁸ Neither of these stories is convincing. That Zenobia should have turned, of all people, to the Persians for help is hardly credible. Moreover, Shapur's weakened Empire would hardly have been able to launch a new war against Aurelian. The siege of Palmyra, as it is reported by the sources, should be ahistorical, since Zenobia's city had no walls. The walls were erected later, during the time of the Tetrarchy, when Palmyra became a Roman frontier fortress. The Palmyrenes probably felt themselves relatively safe in their oasis, the desert protecting them more effectively than any wall ring. The assault on Palmyra therefore must have been a considerable logistical challenge for the Romans. That Aurelian captured the city in such a short time, certainly speaks for serious planning beforehand. It is likely that Palmyra was so weakened by the two subsequent defeats, that the city was no longer capable of organized counter-defence.

The *Historia Augusta* paints the fate of a vanquished Zenobia in vivid and colourful images. It relates that Aurelian pardoned her and brought her to Italy, where she spent the evening of her life in a luxurious villa near Tibur (Tivoli), the retreat of the rich and beautiful.⁷⁹ Zosimos, on the other hand, relates that she died on her way to Italy.⁸⁰ These stories should also be treated with due caution. It is unlikely that Aurelian would have left Zenobia alive. After all, she and her son bore the charisma of Odainat, the victor over the Persians. One can also not ignore the parallelism to Zenobia's western counterpart, the "Gallic" emperor Tetricus, who was also defeated by Aurelian in AD 274. Several sources from late antiquity report that the emperor did not take his life.⁸¹ Presumably, there was a pro-Aurelian bias in the sources, which duly emphasized the emperor's *clementia* even when he must have denied it.

It is undisputed that Aurelian celebrated himself adequately for his victory. After defeating Tetricus in AD 274, thus re-establishing the unity of the Empire, he made a ceremonial entrance in Rome in the late summer of that year and organized magnificent games. He certainly celebrated a triumph, but whether Zenobia and Tetricus were there too, as is claimed by some of the sources, is uncertain. The reunification of the Empire under him as sole emperor, was the dominant subject of Aurelian's self-representation. In his coins, he called himself PACATOR ORBIS ('pacifier of the world'), RESTITVTOR ORBIS ('restorer of the world'), and RESTITVTOR SAECULI ('restorer of the age') (Figure 7.8). Aurelian was planning his next campaign, which was directed against the Persians, when he was murdered in the autumn of AD 275.

For Palmyra's position as an economic and political great power, the city's capture by Aurelian meant the end. This could not be changed by a short-lived revolt



Figure 7.8 AE Antoninianus of the emperor Aurelian, AD 272/73, Herakleia. Obverse: IMP C AVRELIANVS AVG. Draped cuirassed bust of Aurelianus with radiate crown right. Reverse: RESTITVTOR ORBIS, Aurelian standing right, looking left, with sceptre in his left hand, the right hand stretched towards a female who, standing left, crowns him, supplicant in the centre. RIC 349

against Aurelian, whose instigator seems to have been a certain Apsaios, who had been entrusted by the Romans themselves with the administration of Palmyra. Apsaios seems to have proclaimed Antiochos, Zenobia's father, as Augustus. If the episode is historical, Antiochos did not even have time to mint his own coins. The Roman army had the situation quickly under control.⁸² Henceforth, it was to remain the dominant force in the oasis. For this was now Palmyra's role in the rapidly evolving security system of the Roman eastern frontier: to be a bulwark against Persians and nomads.

Notes

- 1 On the following Clifford Ando, *Imperial Rome AD 193 to 284. The Critical Century*, vol. 6, The Edinburgh History of Ancient Rome (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012); Michel Christol, *L'empire romain du III^e siècle. Histoire politique (de 192, mort de Commode, à 325, concile de Nicée)*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Éditions Errance, 1997); Olivier Hekster, *Rome and its Empire. AD 193–284* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008); David Stone Potter, *The Roman Empire at Bay. AD 180–395* (London: Routledge, 2004); Michael Sommer, *Die Soldatenkaiser*, 3rd ed. (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2014); Karl Strobel, *Das Imperium Romanum im "3. Jahrhundert."* Modell einer historischen Krise? Zur Frage mentaler Strukturen breiterer Bevölkerungsschichten in der Zeit von Marc Aurel bis zum Ausgang des 3. Jh. n. Chr. (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 1993), as well as the contributions in Alan Keir Bowman, Peter Garnsey and Averil Cameron, eds., *The Crisis of Empire. A.D. 193–337*, 2nd ed., vol. 12, The Cambridge Ancient History (Cambridge: University Press, 2005), and Klaus-Peter Johnen, *Die Zeit der Soldatenkaiser. Krise und Transformation des Römischen Reiches im 3. Jahrhundert n. Chr. (235–284)*, 2 vols. (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2008). Still fundamental are the classic papers by Andreas Alföldi, "The crisis of the empire (A.D. 249–270)," in *The Imperial Crisis and Recovery. A.D. 193–324*,

- ed. Frank Ezra Adcock, *et al.*, Cambridge Ancient History (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1939); “La grande crise du monde romain au III^e siècle,” *Antiquité Classique* 7 (1938).
- 2 Andreas Alföldi *Studien zur Geschichte der Weltkrise des 3. Jahrhunderts nach Christus* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1967).
- 3 On the West see the meticulous analysis by Christian Witschel, *Krise – Rezession – Stagnation? Der Westen des römischen Reiches im 3. Jahrhundert n. Chr.* (Frankfurt am Main: Clauss, 1999); more generally: Andrea Giardina, “The transition to Late Antiquity,” in *The Cambridge Economic History of the Greco-Roman World*, ed. Walter Scheidel, Ian Morris and Richard Saller (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).
- 4 On the changes in Germany: John D. Creighton and Roger J. A. Wilson, eds., *Roman Germany. Studies in Cultural Interaction* (Portsmouth, RI: Journal of Roman Archaeology, 1999); Malcolm Todd, *The Early Germans* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992); “The Germanic peoples and Germanic society,” in *The Crisis of empire, AD 193–337*, Cambridge Ancient History (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Peter S. Wells, *The Barbarians Speak. How the Conquered Peoples shaped Roman Europe* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999); Herwig Wolfram, *Das Reich und die Germanen zwischen Antike und Mittelalter* (Berlin: Wolf Jobst Siedler, 1990).
- 5 Cf. Jochen Haas, *Die Umweltkrise des 3. Jahrhundert n. Chr. im Nordwesten des Imperium Romanum. Interdisziplinäre Studien zu einem Aspekt der allgemeinen Reichskrise im Bereich der beiden Germaniae sowie der Belgica und der Raetia* (Stuttgart: Steiner, 2006).
- 6 Heiko Steuer, “Archäologie und germanische Sozialgeschichte. Forschungstendenzen in den 1990er Jahren,” in *Runische Schriftkultur in kontinental-skandinavischer und angelsächsischer Wechselbeziehung*, ed. Klaus Düwel (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1994).
- 7 The only narrative of the events is given by Shapur’s great inscription at Naqsh-e Rostam, the *Res Gestae Divi Saporis* (RGDS, 3): “When at first we had become established in the Empire, Gordianus Caesar raised in all of the Roman Empire a force from the Goth and German realms and marched on Asurestan [Assur], against Eransah [Iran] and against us. On the border of Asurestan, at Misikhe, a great frontal battle occurred. Gordianus Caesar was killed and the Roman force was destroyed.”
- 8 Cf. Christian Körner, *Philippus Arabs. Ein Soldatenkaiser in der Tradition des antoninisch-severischen Prinzipats* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2002), 120–34, whose scrutiny of the evidence is as meticulous as it is convincing. Cf. Peter Edwell, *Between Rome and Persia. The Middle Euphrates, Mesopotamia and Palmyra under Roman Control* (London: Routledge, 2008), 175–81.
- 9 The resistance was apparently organized by the local temple’s high priest, a certain Sampsigeramus, who, not long afterwards, claimed the purple for himself (Ioh. Malal. 12,26).
- 10 Simon James, “Stratagems, combat, and ‘chemical warfare’ in the siege mines of Dura-Europos,” *American Journal of Archaeology* 115 (2011).
- 11 On this Michael Sommer, “Empire of glory. Weberian categories and the complexities of authority in imperial Rome,” *Max Weber Studies* 11 (2011).
- 12 On the rule of Valerian and the division of imperial authority: Michel Christol, “Les règnes de Valérien et de Gallien (253–268). Travaux d’ensemble, questions chronologiques,” *ANRW II* 2 (1975); Toni Glas, *Valerian. Kaisertum und Reformansätze in der Krisenphase des Römischen Reiches* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2014); Wolfgang Kuhoff, *Herrschartum und Reichskrise. Die Regierungszeit der römischen Kaiser Valerianus und Gallienus (253–268 n. Chr.)*, vol. 4/5, Kleine Hefte der Münzsammlung an der Ruhr-Universität Bochum (Bochum: Norbert Brockmeyer, 1979).
- 13 RGDS 9–12.

- 14 The chronology of events in the wake of Valerian's defeat in the East has been elaborated by Udo Hartmann, *Das palmyrenische Teilreich*. Oriens et Occidens. Vol. 2, Stuttgart (Franz Steiner, 2001), 132–45.
- 15 This information, provided by Hist. Aug. tyr. trig. 12,1, is most likely flawed.
- 16 There is considerable variation in spelling: Greek Ὀδαίναθος, Ὠδέναθος and Latin Odenathus, Odaenathus, Ordinatus, Odonatus respectively, are, more or less corrupted, transliterations of Palmyrene 'dynt/Odainat, and Arabic Uḡayna respectively.
- 17 Synk. p. 466,24f.; Zon. 12,23; Mal. 12, p. 297, 4–10. Contra the complete obliteration with good arguments Hartmann, *Das palmyrenische Teilreich* 2, 139.
- 18 According to Zos. 1,39,2 Odainat was "a Palmyrene who, like his ancestors, was in very high esteem with the emperors." It is rather unlikely that members of the Odainat family had been noticed by the emperors. Totally obscure in the second century, the family did not rise to prominence before the second quarter of the third century.
- 19 PAT 0558 = Michał Gawlikowski, "Les princes de Palmyre," *Syria* 62 (1985): no. 2. PAT 2815 = *ibid.*, Nr. 13. Hartmann, *Das palmyrenische Teilreich* 2, 89, claims that Waballat was the first of the Odainat family to hold Roman citizenship. This assumption is hardly compelling.
- 20 Above, p. 96.
- 21 Fest. 23; Hier. chron. a. 2282.
- 22 PAT 0290 = CIS 3944 = Gawlikowski, "Princes," Nr. 4: Σεπτίμιον Αἰράνην Ὀδαινάθου τὸν λαμπρότατον συνκλητικὸν ἐξα[ρχον Παλμυ]ρηνῶν [...]. The term *πάτρωνα* clearly recalls the Latin word *patronus*, which suggests that there was a relationship of patronage between the soldiers Flavianus and Hairan. Unconvincing is the interpretation by Jean-Baptiste Yon, *Les notables de Palmyre* (Beyrouth: Institut français d'archéologie du Proche-Orient, 2002), 143, who claims that the term reflects "sans ambiguïté" the adoption of Roman concepts of *patrocinium* by the Palmyrenes. Below, p. 197–199.
- 23 PAT 2753 = Gawlikowski, "Princes," no. 1.
- 24 PAT 2815 = *ibid.*, Nr. 13.
- 25 On the Palmyrene elite below, p. 200–3.
- 26 This typology is based on Max Weber's sociology of authority: Max Weber, "Die drei reinen Typen der legitimen Herrschaft," in *Weltgeschichtliche Analysen, Politik* (Stuttgart: Kröner, 1956).
- 27 Hartmann's notion that Odainat's authority did not extend to the city, but only to Palmyra's hinterland is misleading. Hartmann, *Das palmyrenische Teilreich* 2, 93–94, claims that Odainat was only commissioned with the "external protection" of Palmyra, while the "traditional constitution was maintained in the full extent even after power had been handed over to the new head of the city."
- 28 Gawlikowski, "Princes," nos. 5, 7, 8 and 9 (= PAT 0291) are dated, no. 6 is undated. The title reads unanimously λαμπρότατος ὑπατικός; in the Palmyrene version of no. 9 it is transliterated to *nhyr' hptyq'*.
- 29 Fergus Millar, *The Roman Near East. 31 BC–AD 337* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 165, is undecided between the two alternatives. Hartmann, *Das palmyrenische Teilreich* 2, 104–07, claims that Odainat was appointed *consul suffectus* in AD 256, during the fighting on the Euphrat and *in absentia*, and held the governorship of the province of Syria Phoenice in 257/58.
- 30 PAT 0291 = Gawlikowski, "Princes," no. 9: τὸν δεσπότην (Greek), and *mrn* (Palmyrene) respectively.
- 31 Thus Millar, *Roman Near East*, 165.
- 32 Thus convincingly Hartmann, *Das palmyrenische Teilreich* 2, 104.
- 33 Gawlikowski, "Princes," no. 10.
- 34 Hist. Aug. tyr. trig. 16,1.

- 35 Nothing solid is provided by the ancient sources. What the *Historia Augusta* (tyr. trig. 30,3) claims – that Zenobia was a descendant of Cleopatra and the Ptolemies – belongs most certainly to the realms of fancy: the parallel between Zenobia and Cleopatra is too obvious. Hist. Aug. Aur. 31,2 mentions a usurper called Achilles, an alleged relative or even the father (*parens*) of Zenobia. The usurper's real name was Antiochos. Whether or not he was related to Zenobia will remain uncertain, despite an impressive amount of learned guesswork by Hartmann, *Das palmyrenische Teilreich* 2, 116–24.
- 36 Ibid., 124.
- 37 The authorship of the *Historia Augusta*, this late antique compilation of imperial biographies, is disputed, too. There is no conclusive proof as to whether the collection is the work of one single author or rather of a group of several authors. For an IT-based approach see Burkhard Meißner, “Computergestützte Untersuchungen zur stilistischen Einheitlichkeit der *Historia Augusta*,” in *Historiae Augustae Colloquium Bonnense*, ed. Giorgio Bonamente and Klaus Rosen (Bari: Laterza, 1997), who argues in favour of the latter.
- 38 Hist. Aug. tyr. trig. 12,3–12.
- 39 Inscriptions, coins and papyri from Asia Minor, Syria and Egypt. Cf. Hartmann, *Das palmyrenische Teilreich* 2, 142. That Odainat's authority was accepted throughout the East is also suggested by Zon. 12,24.
- 40 Defeat of the Macriani: Hist. Aug. Gall. 2,6f.; tyr. trig. 11,2; 12,13–14; 13,3; 14,1; Zon. 12,24; Odainat being entrusted with the mission by Gallienus: Zon. 12,24. Cf. Hartmann, *Das palmyrenische Teilreich* 2, 144.
- 41 Synk. p. 466,25–26 (στρατηγός); Zon. 12,23 (στρατηγός). It is impossible here to revisit the debate about the titles granted to Odainat in all its details. This section is based on the rigorous and convincing reconstruction proposed by Hartmann, *Das palmyrenische Teilreich* 2, 146–61.
- 42 On the special magistracy of the *correctores* Toni Glas and Udo Hartmann, “Die Provinzverwaltung,” in *Die Zeit der Soldatenkaiser*, ed. Klaus-Peter Johné (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2008), 668.
- 43 Thus Hartmann, *Das palmyrenische Teilreich* 2, 159.
- 44 On this important text see the detailed commentary by David Stone Potter, *Prophecy and History in the Crisis of the Roman Empire. A Historical Commentary on the Thirteenth Sibylline Oracle* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990). Cf. also Simon Swain, “Macrianus as the ‘well-horned stag’ in the *Thirteenth Sibylline Oracle*,” *Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies* 33 (1992).
- 45 Or. Sib. 13,158–163.
- 46 Ibid., 164–171. The first section of the Oracle (ibid., 150–154) describes the destructions caused by the Persians and then mentions, somewhat vaguely, a “sun-sent priest [Odainat?],” a “city of the sun [Palmyra?]” and “Phoenicians [Palmyrenes?]” posing a threat to the Persians.
- 47 Gawlikowski, “Princes,” no. 10.
- 48 Hartmann, *Das palmyrenische Teilreich* 2, 178. Some clues are provided by coins and by the titles assumed by Gallienus for Odainat's victories.
- 49 Hist. Aug. tyr. trig. 15,2. Here, a “Herodes” is mentioned, who is none other than Ḥairan/Herodianos.
- 50 Hartmann, *Das palmyrenische Teilreich* 2, 162–67.
- 51 Ibid., 168–175.
- 52 Hist. Aug. Gall. 10,4; 12,1. The episode in which the captured satraps feature appears to be imaginary.
- 53 Hartmann, *Das palmyrenische Teilreich* 2, 190.
- 54 Above, pp. 28–9 and 31 on the expansions of Akkad and Assur.

- 55 Now published with a commentary in Jérémie Schiettecatte, "The political map of Arabia and the Middle East in the third century AD revealed by a Sabaeen inscription," *Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy* 27 (2016).
- 56 Hist. Aug. Gall. 13,6–10; Zos. 1,39,1; 40,1; Synk. p. 467,15–28; Dexipp. FGrH 100, fr. 28; Cont. Dion. fr. 9. Cf. Hartmann, *Das palmyrenische Teilreich* 2, 214–16.
- 57 Hartmann (ibid., 223–24) takes the information provided by Zon. 12,24 and Hist. Aug. tyr. trig. 17,3 to be accurate, according to which Odaenathus fell victim to an assassination plot contrived by his nephew. This is pure speculation. For a sceptical reassessment of the evidence see Ted Kaizer, "Odaenathus von Palmyra. Römischer Orient, 267/68," in *Politische Morde. Vom Altertum bis zur Gegenwart*, ed. Michael Sommer (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2005).
- 58 Zos. 1,39,2.
- 59 Max Weber, "Legitime Herrschaft," 164–65
- 60 On this and on the following: Ando, *Imperial Rome* 6, 201–06; Udo Hartmann, "Claudius Gothicus und Aurelianus," in *Die Zeit der Soldatenkaiser*, ed. Klaus-Peter Johne (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2008); Potter, *The Roman Empire at Bay. AD 180–395*, 251–68; Sommer, *Soldatenkaiser*, 54–57.
- 61 Karlheinz Dietz, "Zum Kampf zwischen Gallienus und Postumus," in *Die Krise des 3. Jahrhunderts n. Chr. und das Gallische Sonderreich. Akten des interdisziplinären Kolloquiums Xanten 26. bis 28. Februar 2009*, ed. H. Thomas Fischer, Schriften des Lehr- und Forschungszentrums für die antiken Kulturen des Mittelmeerraumes – Centre for Mediterranean Cultures (Wiesbaden: Reichert Verlag, 2012); John F. Drinkwater, *The Gallic Empire. Separatism and Continuity in the North-Western Provinces of the Roman Empire, A.D. 260–274*, vol. 52, *Historia Einzelschriften* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 1987); Werner Eck, "Das Gallische Sonderreich. Eine Einführung zum Stand der Forschung," in *Die Krise*, ed. H. Fischer; Ingemar König, *Die gallischen Usurpatoren von Postumus bis Tetricus*, 2nd ed. (München: C. H. Beck, 1981).
- 62 PAT 0317. The inscription bears no date, but as Waballat is not yet labelled *imperator*, it probably dates before AD 270. Cf. Hartmann, *Das palmyrenische Teilreich* 2, 242.
- 63 Ibid., 245.
- 64 Ibid., 247.
- 65 The chronology has convincingly been established by Hartmann, ibid., 278–296. Cf. Eugenia Equini Schneider, *Septimia Zenobia Sebaste*, vol. 61, *Studia archaeologica* (Roma: "L'Erma" di Bretschneider, 1993), 61–74, and, for Egypt, Friederike Herklotz, "Ägypten in hellenistischer Zeit. 332–30 v. Chr.," in *Die Zeit der Soldatenkaiser*, ed. Klaus-Peter Johne (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2008), 808–13. On the numismatic evidence now Roger Bland, "The coinage of Vaballathus and Zenobia from Antioch and Alexandria," *Numismatic Chronicle* 171 (2011).
- 66 Above, p. 125.
- 67 Hartmann, *Das palmyrenische Teilreich* 2, 284, n. 111, assumes that there was a "pro-Palmyrene party"; similarly Friederike Herklotz, *Prinzeß und Pharao. Der Kult des Augustus in Ägypten*. Oikumene. Studien zur antiken Weltgeschichte. Vol. 4 (Berlin: Verlag Antike, 2007), 809 ("strong pro-Palmyrene Party").
- 68 Hist. Aug. Claud. 11,1; Zos. 1,44,1 (ἀνδρὸς Αἰγυπτίου).
- 69 Thus, based on Hist. Aug. Gall. 13,4–5, Hartmann, *Teilreich*, 2, 261.
- 70 Eugen Cizek, *L'empereur Aurélien et son temps* (Paris: Les Belles lettres, 1994), 117–22; Alaric Watson, *Aurelian and the third century* (London: Routledge, 1999), 70–88.
- 71 Hartmann, *Das palmyrenische Teilreich* 2, 354–55.
- 72 Thus essentially Millar, *Roman Near East*, 335: "The facts suggest that it was not a separatist movement, designed to detach Syria, or the whole Near East, from Roman rule, but an abortive claim to the empire."

- 73 The most comprehensive, methodologically sound study on Roman usurpation is Egon Flaig, *Den Kaiser herausfordern. Die Usurpation im Römischen Reich* (Frankfurt am Main: Campus-Verl., 1992).
- 74 Below, p. 194–99.
- 75 But thus relatively recently: Yasmine Zahran, *Zenobia between Reality and Legend* (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2003).
- 76 Zos. 1,52,8. The number is almost certainly exaggerated.
- 77 Ibid., 1,55–56.
- 78 Hist. Aug. Aur. 28,1–4; Cont. Dion. fr. 10,5.
- 79 Hist. Aug. tyr. trig. 27,2.
- 80 Zos. 1,59.
- 81 Aurel. Vict. 35,5; Eutr. 9,13.
- 82 Hist. Aug. Aur. 31; Zos. 1,60–61 Cf. Hartmann, *Das palmyrenische Teilreich* 2, 395–402.

8 Palmyra

Aspects – perspectives

Palmyra's great appearance on the stage of world politics lasted only slightly over a decade, from AD 260 to 272. Those dozen years under Odainat and Zenobia, however, were so significant for the oasis' history, that it is vital to analyse its supernova-like eruption and its demise, which also resembled a dying star. To understand the uniqueness of Palmyra, we have to leave the history of events and enter a deeper layer of the historical totality, the layer of structures which change only in very slow rhythms. Religion, the economy and social institutions are factors which have left their mark on Palmyra's material culture rather than on the texts, which are mostly related to events. This chapter will, accordingly, deal with Palmyra's cityscape, its temples, the necropolises, its world of images, of commodities and inscriptions.

Explorations

As in Paul Veyne's recent book on Palmyra, a visitor from the West is to be sent on a journey to witness the overwhelming impression made by the metropolis in the early 70s of the third century AD. There is no way of telling that war is in the air. The traveller approaches the city from the west, on the road from Emesa to Palmyra. Shortly before reaching the oasis, he turns left, climbing the hill where now the citadel of Qal'at Ibn Ma'n, erected by the Mamluks, towers. From here, he can enjoy the view of the Palmyra basin with the bustling city at his feet (Figure 8.1).

First thing to catch the eye is the broad and over one kilometre long colonnaded street, the Great Colonnade, which crosses the city diagonally from north-west to south-east. At its western end, it meets at a right angle a second street with porticoes, the so-called Transverse Colonnade, which is shorter, but even broader than the first one, ending in the south-west in an oval square. Slightly to the south of this square, on Palmyra's western edge, the extension of the Transverse Colonnade meets the road from Emesa, on which our visitor has travelled. Southwards to the right, the wadi, the Efqa spring, and behind it the palm trees of the oasis make their appearance.

North of the wadi, a district with a grid of streets and rectangular *insulae*, well known to the visitor from numerous cities of the Greek and Roman world,



Figure 8.1 Palmyra. View from the citadel over the city

stretches on both sides of the Great Colonnade. Early in the fifth century BC, the architect Hippodamos of Miletus had promoted the concept of rationally planned cities with rectangular streets and houses of an identical pattern, to make the democratic system of many poleis visible in the cityscape as well.¹ The idea had found eager followers in the Hellenistic monarchies, and above all among the Romans. Wherever the Romans founded new cities, Hippodamos was, at least indirectly, their designer, since the first thing the Romans did was mark the street grid, and then raise houses on the *insulae*, much as they were outlined in the architect's manual.² So far, the traveller feels at home in the city in which he has just arrived. From the sea of houses in the Hippodamian quarter, individual houses grouped around courtyards tower up, which are recognizable as stately homes. He can also distinguish a small temple in the distance. Halfway down the Great Colonnade there is a crossroads, marked by a Tetrapylon. Here another colonnaded street branches off to the south. The main axis describes a slight bend to the north, and the buildings on both sides of the road take on a completely different character. The experienced observer recognizes several large, apparently public, buildings, a generously proportioned courtyard surrounded by porticoes, a traditionally built Roman theatre with *scaenae frons*, and another temple.

Even the sight of this city quarter does not arouse a sense of strangeness. The orthogonal road grid has not been applied here. Apparently, the city quarter had been built before the urban planning based on a large-scale Hippodamian layout was conceived. This, too, was by no means uncommon in the Roman Empire.



Figure 8.2 Western necropolis, 1923

Many cities had already grown organically before they were planned and constructed as new towns. The builders of the Great Colonnade must have shown consideration for the existing buildings, when they laid it across the district. In fact, the easternmost part of the road is marked by a prominent bend to the south, and the bend is again disguised by an ingenious device: a large three-gated arch, behind which the colonnade becomes the entrance to what is by the far largest building of the city. Quite in the background, before the city merges into the palm gardens of the oasis, a colossal compound rises up: apparently a temple as well, surrounded by a square courtyard bordered by porticoes. This sanctuary is so extraordinary in its dimensions, that even our well-travelled visitor can't take his eyes off it. Then he makes a discovery, suddenly realizing that he is here on the extreme edge of the Roman world. The temple is not covered by a peaked roof, as required by Vitruvius, but by a flat roof lined with battlements.

Puzzled, the traveller decides to leave his vantage point and take a closer look at the city, which only at first glance appears to be familiar. He descends from the hill and goes back to the wadi, where one of the great necropolises is located (Figure 8.2). So the Palmyrenes also bury their dead along the major roads as they do in Rome. These tombs, however, have nothing in common with the monuments in which the inhabitants of the city on the Tiber commemorate their deceased. The visitor recognizes towers soaring high in the sky, and large, house-like, low-rise structures with richly articulated facades, reminiscent of Roman temples, and staircases that seem to lead into underground chambers. The hypogea and house tombs are new to him, but he knows similar towers from other parts of the Roman Near East from the Euphrates and the Ḥaurān.³ They also remind him of the kind of tombs seen in Judea, now called Syria Palaestina, and in Phoenicia.



Figure 8.3 Sarcophagus of an anonymous tomb owner, c. AD 240

The towers have up to five floors, all filled with loculi, where evidently hundreds, if not thousands, of individuals were buried. Inscriptions in Palmyrene characters provide information on the men and women who have found their final resting place here. Many of the tombs carry stone busts of the deceased. Unlike in Rome, however, where artists go to great lengths to make the representations look as similar as possible to the actual dead during their lifetime, uniformity prevails. More important than the individual appearance of the deceased seem to be the status and function they once held in the world of the living. Jewellery and clothing provide information as well. Personalities of outstanding importance are not buried in the niches but in sarcophagi posted on the ground floor of the tower. Larger-than-life-sized statues propped on *klinai* show the deceased enthroned, in strange clothes, on the lid of the sarcophagus.

One of the sarcophagi, an especially splendid piece, features the tomb owner on its *klinē*-style lid dressed with magnificent robes (Figure 8.3a). The man lies on cushions decorated with flower patterns, wearing a richly adorned, knee-length caftan, and above it, a cloak which is held together with a fibula. A sword hangs on the belt, which identifies him as a warrior. Underneath the caftan, riding trousers can be distinguished, which are stuck in boots with low shafts. Reins in the hand, he is riding a horse. This man is at home in the oasis. People would trust him to lead caravans safely through the expanse of the desert. The front of the sarcophagus is decorated with a frieze featuring seven standing individuals. The man in the centre is highlighted by dress and insignia (Figure 8.3b). He wears a diadem and the toga, the official dress of a Roman magistrate. Behind him, there are a priest's cap and a wreath. While the rest of the figures carry fruit, sacrificial animals, and implements, he performs a pre-sacrifice on a *thymiaterion* in accordance with the Roman rite. This man, staging himself as a real Roman, is none other than the tomb owner represented on the lid with the traditional dress of the desert. He was engaged in long-distance trade, which is testified by the goddess Astarte, portrayed with a spear on the narrow side of the sarcophagus, the patroness of the caravan merchants.⁴

The visitor has wandered through the necropolis and now enters the unfortified city (Figure 8.4). All a traveller entering Palmyra has to pass through is a tollgate. The visitor turns to the left and finds himself on the colonnaded oval square [1], where the Transverse Colonnade [2] begins. It is only now that the enormous dimensions of the road are revealed: almost 35 metres in width, 22.30 metres alone for the driveway, the columns reaching a height of almost 8 metres.⁵ Half way up the columns, plinths have been mounted, bearing bronze statues erected in honour of worthy men.⁶ Inscriptions tell stories about them. The newcomer can easily decipher many of the inscriptions: they are bilingual, written in Palmyrene and in Greek. A visitor from the Mediterranean is well acquainted with the practice of honouring good citizens with statues – however, he has never before set eyes on such a forest of statues. Other inscriptions report dedications to the gods. On either side shops line the street, which teem with activity.⁷

The Transverse Colonnade leads to a quadratic square of about 30 metres on each side [3]. On each of its west and north sides stands a freshly built, generously



Figure 8.4 Archaeological map of Palmyra

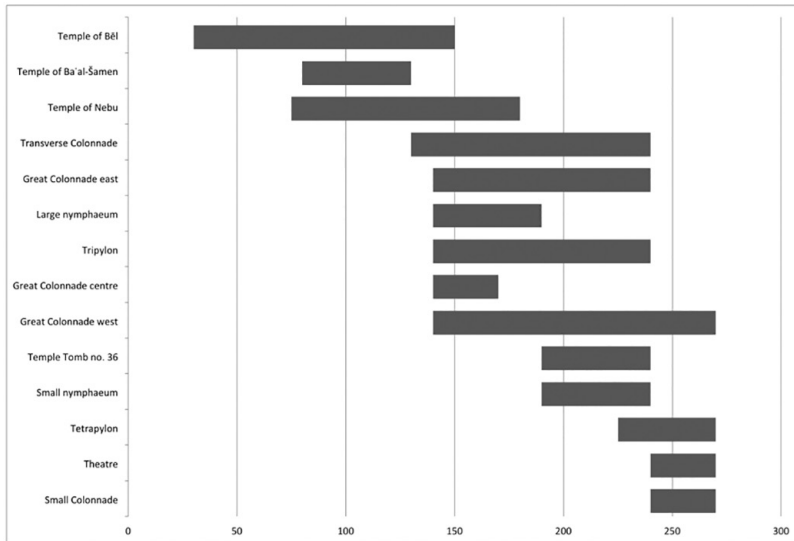


Figure 8.5 Approximate dating of selected buildings of Palmyra

dimensioned house-tomb. The Great Colonnade [4: see also Figure 8.6] branches off to the east, leading through a three-gated arch. From a distance, one notices the Tetrapylon marking the end of the Colonnade's first section, measuring over half a kilometre. The road is slightly narrower than the Transverse Colonnade, but still offers plenty of space measuring 26.80 metres in width. Every single one of the over 300 columns, each nearly 9 metres high, carries a plinth with a statue. The columns at the street entrances surpass the others in height and beauty, part of them carrying two plinths and soaring in tapered form above the capitals. These columns display a second capital at the airy height of almost 14 metres. The roads branching to the left and to the right give access to the Hippodamian district and its *insulae*.⁸

After more than 500 metres, the visitor reaches the Tetrapylon [5], which rises on a crossroads expanding to an oval square. The platform is raised on two steps, with a surface area of 20 by 20 metres. Four Corinthian columns of red Aswan granite stand on four pedestals arranged in quadratic form. They carry an entablature with architrave, frieze, geison and sima.⁹ To the right, at an angle of about 65 degrees, the main axis is joined by another colonnade, which leads to the wadi. One of the streets constituting the grid of the Hippodamian quarter branches off to the left.¹⁰

Following the main street, the visitor unexpectedly steps into the urban heart of Palmyra. The different depths of the porticoes and the differently sized column interspaces indicate that this part was not built all at once, but piece by piece, possibly by different builders. Even in this approximately 300-metre-long



Figure 8.6 Great Colonnade, central section

section, the columns, nearly 150 in number, tower almost 9 metres high. The street here is much narrower and only between 10 and 15 metres wide.¹¹ The bustle of the human crowds is all the more dense. Most of the public buildings giving their stamp to the cityscape are to be found here: a large nymphaeum [6] with apse and statue niches, from whose rear walls water falls, flowing over steps into a semicircular basin.¹² Opposite, there is a large peristyle building [7] with an exedra, fronted, in the colonnade, by skilfully crafted, fluted columns. The attentive visitor discerns two statues awarding honours to Odainat and Zenobia. The inscription of the statue of the “King of Kings” mentions Septimius Zabda and Zabbai as those awarding honours. Both men refer to themselves as “supreme commanders” (*rb hyl*).¹³ If the visitor is not yet fully convinced of standing at a particularly prominent place in Palmyra’s cityscape, a glance into the interior of the building will suffice. Here is the statue of a Roman emperor, with an inscription awarding honours to the “*Autokratōr kaisar*, son of the deified.”¹⁴

Opposite this building, a road branches off northwards from the main colonnade, forming the eastern end of the Hippodamian quarter. The traveller follows this side street, and two blocks farther, after a few hundred metres, reaches a temenos bordering on the west side of the road. Covering a surface of 160 by 60 metres, it consists of a series of three colonnaded courtyards with a small cella built as a prostyle *in antis* with six columns. The Corinthian columns of the porch also feature plinths with statues. The Temple of Ba‘al-Šamen [8: see also Figure 8.7] welcomes



Figure 8.7 Temple of Ba'al-Šamen, 1910

its western visitor with an atmosphere reminiscent of the Mediterranean. In the back of the cella, there is an aedicula with the cult image crowned by an eagle. It is framed by an exedra and the richly articulated column-and-niche architecture of the thalamus, which is so typical of the region's sacred buildings. That the visitor is not standing in a Roman sanctuary, but in a temple in the Empire's far East, is to be recognized from the spiral staircase leading up to the roof. The cella's roof is flat, not pitched. In addition, the side walls have window openings, also characteristic of sanctuaries in the Near East.¹⁵

On returning to the Great Colonnade, the visitor stands in front of the theatre [9], which rises to the left, on the opposite side of the road, in the middle of a column-lined, horseshoe-shaped square, which is 104 by 82 metres in size. The square looks unfinished. Numerous column bases have not yet received the final touch.¹⁶ In the south, the square joins another colonnaded street leading to the wadi. To the east, bordering the theatre square, there is a large residential building [10] made partly of stone, partly of mud bricks. Its fifteen rooms on the ground floor are grouped around a Corinthian peristyle.¹⁷ The square is dominated by the theatre, to which it owes its shape. Measured by the standards of Palmyra, it is not particularly large. The auditorium, *cavea*, with its diameter of just 92 metres, is hardly impressive. But the theatre's architecture follows the Roman model accurately. The presence, in this environment, of such a building is remarkable enough. What kind of dramas, if any, are performed in this theatre? And should one not expect a Greek theatre rather than a Roman one in this part of the world? After all, in Palmyra, the material culture imported from the Mediterranean tends to dress itself in Greek garb. Why not the theatre?¹⁸

From the theatre square, one reaches a vast compound consisting of several large courtyards, with a hall-like building. The western part is occupied by a square courtyard which is about 75 metres in length. It is surrounded by porticoes with numerous honorific statues. Inside, a market is held. It is here, on the Agora [11: see also Figure 8.8], where Palmyra's economic heart beats. Luxury goods from the Far East and India are traded, as well as local merchandise flowing into the city from the Palmyrene. Here, visitors can admire the inscriptions reporting the dangerous journeys of the Palmyrene caravans and sailors. The mother of all Palmyrene inscriptions is, however, in the adjacent courtyard. It covers one of the ten-metre-high walls of the enclosure, which also serves as a trading area. The inscription contains Palmyra's famous tax law, which establishes the treasurers' share of the local goods' exchange.¹⁹

On the Agora, city officials supervise all commercial activity. They deal with measures, weights and seals. If the curious guest is lucky, he can catch a glimpse of the seal used by the city to guarantee every transaction's lawfulness. The effigy features a woman in profile wearing a mural crown. A widely travelled visitor who has been to the major centres of Hellenistic civilization will immediately recognize the image as Tyche, the feminine personification of Antioch. Her picture is not only to be found on the Agora. Indeed, it seems to be ubiquitous in Palmyra: on the *tesserae* used as tickets for the religious banquets, on the local coinage still in circulation, and even in one of the necropolises, as a large relief.²⁰ Did the Palmyrenes, therefore, shamelessly plagiarize the Antiochians?

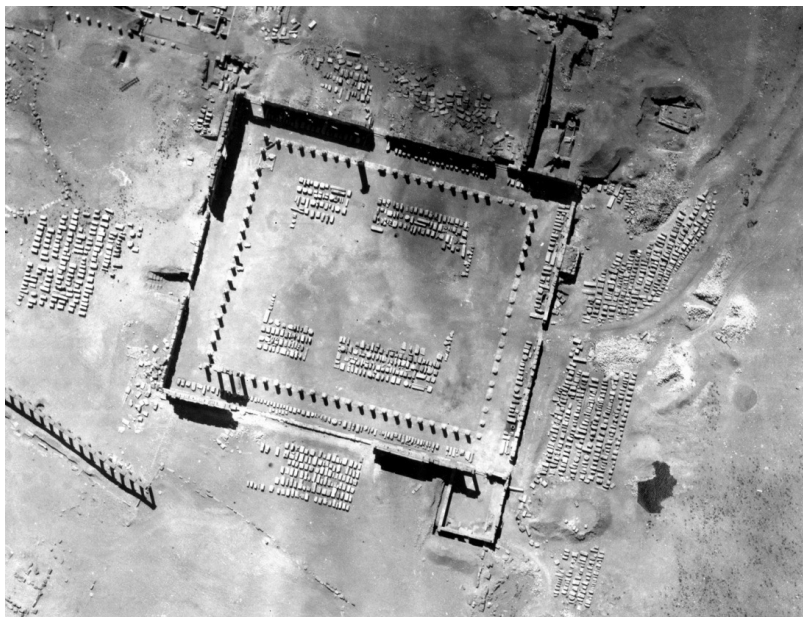


Figure 8.8 Agora, aerial photograph, 1939

Did they lack imagination to find a distinct face for the city they had lavished with such splendour?

The traveller returns to the main street and resumes his way eastward. At the eastern end of the colonnaded street's central section, again on the south side, lies a large sanctuary [12].²¹ The temenos' northern flank was affected by the construction of the Great Colonnade: the gods worshipped in the temple had to cede part of their possessions to the public. That several divinities are venerated in the sanctuary – and not one, as is customary in Hellas and Rome – is suggested by the large number of the deities mentioned in the inscriptions and represented on cult reliefs. Among the divine inhabitants of the sanctuary are Nebu, who is known in Babylon as Nabu, and who, like Apollo, possesses qualities of a sun god; the Babylonian goddess Nanaia, who is known to the Westerner as Artemis; and Rešef, a Phoenician god, who is worshipped by the Greeks as Herakles. If it was necessary to show the visitor the cosmopolitanism of Palmyra, then this international assembly of divine beings would have easily convinced him.²²

Leaving the temple, the visitor passes through another monumental arch, again with three gates. This Tripylon [13: see also Figure 8.9] with its wedge-shaped layout camouflages the Great Colonnade's southward bend from the glances of passers-by.²³ The Tripylon leads over to the eastern section of the colonnade, both the widest by far – at 37 metres – but at 250 metres in length also the shortest. The Colonnade leads directly to the great temenos in the very east of Palmyra. To the right, to the south-west of the main axis, which now runs from north-west to south-east, is a large hall [14].²⁴ Next to it there is a second nymphaeum [15], from which runs a constant stream of precious water.



Figure 8.9 Tripylon, 1923

Once the visitor has passed this nymphaeum, he stands in front of a compound whose importance is underlined by its sheer size [16: see also Figure 8.10]. The sacred building, despite its location in the eastern outskirts of Palmyra, is the architectural ensemble on which the city is literally focused. Diagonally, the main road leads to the nearly square temenos with a side length of 200 metres and an almost exact alignment from west to east. One enters the courtyard through the monumental propylaea on the west side. On all four sides, the courtyard is enclosed by porticoes, and again the statues of Palmyrene notables adorn the columns. Here, one can see the men who have generously given from their private wealth to finance the construction of the temple. Several buildings are spread across the courtyard: an altar with a canopy in the north; a ramp, through which the sacrificial animals are led from the portico to the altar; an elongated banquet hall in the part facing the entrance; and, opposite the altar, in the south of the courtyard, a large lustration basin for purification purposes. To the south of the banqueting hall, opposite the propylaea, there is cubic stone block decorated with niches. Is this a *hamāna*, which, in many sanctuaries of the Near East, serves as an altar, a shrine, a gods' image and his dwelling-place – all at the same time?²⁵

All this is overshadowed by the colossal cella, which rises in the courtyard's approximate centre. The huge pseudodipteros²⁶ measures 62 by 37 metres, and the cella alone has a floor space of 38 by 13.5 metres. The resemblance to the Temple of Artemis at Magnesia on the Maeander is obvious. This work of Hermogenes, created around 200 BC, is the architectural model of a whole series of sanctuaries in Asia Minor. The rich decor, the airy lightness of the portico, the slender



Figure 8.10 Temple of Bēl, aerial photograph, 1937

columns, their ratio of 8:15 and the widened central span at the front – all these were visionary inspirations of the Hellenistic architect, still appealing 250 years later, to the builders of Palmyra's main sanctuary. Nevertheless, the differences are conspicuous: the Palmyrene temple has Corinthian columns, the sanctuary in Magnesia Ionic ones; in Palmyra, the capitals are lined with metal, a luxury not even the builders of the Magnesian temple had allowed themselves.

But above all, Hermogenes would never have provided his temple with a crest of triangular wedged battlements, a flat roof, and towers. His temple would have had a cella to be entered through an entrance in the narrow side, not, as here, in the western long side, where it is accessible by means of a wide ramp, in addition to being set off against the central axis. In the cella of the Palmyrene temple, which is entered through a grand portal, there is plenty of light, because through several large windows, sunbeams fall into the room. On the north and south sides of the cella, there is an elevated thalamus, where the images of the gods are removed from the sight of the uninitiated. The northern thalamus is elevated by 2.80 metres against the level of the cella. The walls are lined with metal, the ceiling and the floor consist of one large stone block each. The dome, carved in the middle of the ceiling, depicts the heavenly vault, with representations of planetary deities in seven cassettes. From the centre, Zeus, who, in his manifestation as a heavenly eagle, also guards the doorstep of the thalamus entrance, looks down. In the background of the thalamus, there are the anthropomorphic cult images of a triad, with Bēl in the centre, and 'Aglibōl and Yarhibōl to the sides.²⁷

Bēl, whom the Palmyrenes identify with Zeus, is the main tenant of the divine shared flat in the great sanctuary,²⁸ but by no means the only one: 'Aglibōl ("Chariot of Bōl"), Yarhibōl ("Companion of Bōl"), the protective god of the Efqa spring, the planet gods, Malakbēl and Nanaia are other prominent inhabitants of the religious compound.²⁹ To the east of the adyton, there is a lateral chamber with rich decoration; to its west a staircase, whose steps lead to the roof, where they end underneath a crenelated turret.

The southern thalamus' design is much simpler. It is also elevated against the cella, by around 2.50 metres. There is no staircase leading up to it, but a wide ramp. In the southern adyton, Bēl sits on a *klinē*. On solemn occasions, the cultic community celebrates religious feasts and entertains the god in this room. Large idols are kept here, which, on festivals, are carried by the priests, or by pack animals, to other sanctuaries of the city. This room is flanked by two stairwells, which also lead to the roof. The eastern staircase has a square floor plan, while the western one is laid out as a spiral staircase.³⁰

At the end of the tour, the sun is setting over the Palmyra Chains. Our visitor enters the spiral staircase and slowly climbs the roof of the Temple of Bēl. From here, he enjoys the breathtaking view across the roofs of Palmyra. To the west, the eye follows the Great Colonnade to the Valley of the Tombs. To the south-east, the view reaches out to the palm trees of the oasis, to which the city owes its name, and finally loses itself in the expanse of the desert. The traveller is exhausted and somewhat confused by the impressions of the day. He has found so much unfamiliar in the familiar. Or should one say: so much familiar in the unfamiliar?

Blurs

Our fictitious visitor is not the only one to be perplexed. Modern research also has difficulty interpreting the material culture of the oasis city, and working out the meaning it had for the Palmyrenes. For when it comes to stones, they are silent. What matters are the thoughts and ideas experienced by sponsors and architects, priests, cult attenders, artists, shopkeepers and flâneurs, citizens of Palmyra, travellers and guests, when they constructed and when they used their built environment. They took them, however, into the grave. The only way for us to get closer to them is to notice peculiarities falling out of the norm, and try to explain them. Then, perhaps, the stones will disclose some part of their history.

Although the Roman world was dominated by Greek culture and, as such, initially quite distant from the Palmyrenes, there is no mistaking that the oasis knew exactly the signs and codes of that world and could perfectly well implement them. If the Temple of Bēl in Palmyra was modelled on a Hellenistic pattern, and the portal was set on its long side instead of the narrow one, that does not imply an improper use of a visual vocabulary which was not well understood. On the contrary, the modification of the pseudodipteros building plan, which goes back to Hermogenes, was made intentionally. The result of it was no architectonic pidgin, but a coherent concept which exactly corresponded to the community's concept of sacred architecture and their religious needs. Certainly a crucial role here was played by such elements as "high locations," places hidden from the general public, and "Knickachsen" ("kinked axes"), which were dominant in many other cults of the Near East since ancient times.

The religious practices taking place in the Temple of Bēl were so different from what a visitor from the West knew, that he would have probably rubbed his eyes. Nevertheless, it is not correct to speak of a foreign "religion." For the time being, the prerequisites were still missing. What text-based, monotheistic religions could accomplish was alien to ancient polytheism. Founding communities on a system of ethics and dogmas, by virtue of textualization of religion and canon formation within religion, was first developed by Judaism, and then by Christianity. What mattered for the polytheistic cults, which were organized mostly in the urban context, was orthopraxis, the correct observance of religious rites. Orthodoxy did not matter. In the absence of "faith," it was impossible for the polytheistic cults to offer their participants a sense of belonging to a "religious community."³¹ This could be provided, at best, though to a limited extent, by the mystery cults, which were reserved exclusively to those who had undergone certain initiation rituals.³² As long as there were no religious communities, there was no room for mutual demarcation along the lines of dogma and faith. Polytheistic antiquity was fundamentally incapable of thinking of religion "in the plural, in the modern sense."³³

During the imperial period, however, the steady expansion of the geographic horizon, the intensification of intercultural contacts and the progressive interconnectedness of the ancient Mediterranean world led to assumptions perceiving religious diversity as a problem. Occasionally, people were afraid of foreign gods,

regarding them with distrust when they settled in their own city. In Rome this was, not accidentally, the case especially with imported mysteries, such as the cult of Isis, which was repeatedly banned under Augustus and Tiberius, and whose followers were even expelled from Rome by Agrippa in 21 BC.³⁴ These cults were not simply regarded as foreign “religions,” but as superstitions. *Superstitio* and *religio* are a pair of opposites. While *religio* reduces the “acceptance of gods as part of the social order”³⁵ to a single concept, *superstitio* is, for Cicero, orderless worship, or irrational fear of gods.³⁶

When exotic cults were rejected in Rome, the resentment was not directed against foreign beliefs themselves, and, mostly, not even so much against the imported gods, even though their appearance was unfamiliar. Usually, offence was taken because of the religious practices connected with the cults. For instance, the emperor Marcus Aurelius Antoninus (known as Elagabalus), a native of the Syrian city of Emesa, who arrived in Rome in AD 219, did not arouse such a deep hatred in the city simply by bringing from his ancestral temple the god he worshipped, which was in the form of a meteor rock, but rather because of the way he worshipped it, which was obscene to Roman ethics. The emperor sang barbaric songs, abstained from certain dishes, dressed himself in an unspeakable manner for a Roman ruler, had questionable sexual practices, and behaved effetely. Rumours exaggerated the strangeness of his religious practices to grotesque forms. The circumcised emperor, reportedly, intended to castrate himself altogether; animals, which were kept enclosed by him in the temple, were fed human genitals, boys had been secretly sacrificed.³⁷

Behind the supposedly religious resentment, there was actually a cultural one. Unlike Greece, with which Rome had been in close contact since its early days, the Semitic-speaking East was perceived as a cosmos of its own, indeed an alien one, which was, however, an essential part of the Empire. *Iam pridem Syrus in Tiberim defluxit Orontes* – “the Syrian Orontes has long since polluted the Tiber” – writes Juvenal at the turn of the first to the second century AD, as he polemicizes against the “Greeks,” who are pouring into the capital. “Yet few of the dregs are Greek,” he adds, groaning and railing against their pipes and harps, their “barbaric tambourines.”³⁸ Juvenal’s Orontes, as symbol of otherness, is clearly not the river flowing through the thoroughly Hellenized Antioch, but rather its upper reaches, which is where Emesa lies, the home city of Elagabalus. Juvenal alludes to people like Yarḥai, or “Iulios Aurelios Heliodoros, son of Antiochos, Palmyrene,” who dedicated an aedicula with a silver statuette to his “native gods” ‘Aglībōl and Malakbēl. This happened in Rome, in February AD 236.³⁹ For Juvenal, Orontes implies Palmyra as well.

One can safely assume that the feeling of strangeness was reciprocal, that Palmyrenes like Yarḥai, who abounded in Rome,⁴⁰ also felt that a gap existed between their background and the traditions of the Empire. Palmyrenes of the diaspora were constant witnesses of cultural differences. These cannot have escaped, however, to those left at home either. Yet their reaction was not openly xenophobic like that of Juvenal, and not so vaguely resentful as the Romans’ response to Elagabalus. Rather, they accepted diversity with open arms. They built a temple

which surpassed in splendour even that of Hermogenes. Inspired by Antioch, they adopted the Tyche as an emblem of their city. They built a colonnaded street, which dominated the public space, as the likes of it did in Tyre, Apameia, and Antioch, cities that were either Greek, or were nurtured with Greek culture. The Palmyrenes built a theatre, which is more emblematic than anything for the Greek lifestyle. They nevertheless chose the Roman version, opting thus for a twofold symbolism: in the Palmyrenes' eyes, the Empire defined itself by a façade, which was thoroughly Greek, and only intermittently revealed its "genuinely" Roman substance, as we retrospectively define it today. This is no surprise. According to the standards of the world in which their city thrived, the Palmyrenes were parvenus. They had arrived late on a stage where Babylonians, Assyrians, Persians, Greeks, Parthians and Romans had already made their entrance before them, some of them even having made their exit. They had little of their "own" to boast, when a whole city shot up on their tiny speck of land. The best proof of this is how they plagiarized the Tyche from the Antiochians. Palmyra had no tradition, which could have expressed its identity. As far as their language was concerned, the Palmyrenes were bilingual, being as proficient in Greek as in their ancestral Aramaic. From the visual point of view, though, they were solidly monoglot: there was nothing else in store than what was offered by Hellenism. So what was more natural for them than copying the successful model of Antioch's Tyche?⁴¹

The Palmyrenes brought the ensemble of cultural codes, institutions and models needed to build a city from home, if they had an immigrant background, or they learned from their neighbours, near and far. Palmyra's culture could therefore only be eclectic from the outset, as the result of negotiation processes and creative borrowings, of acculturation and hybridization. There were two cultural benchmarks: the East, Mesopotamia and Iran; and, increasingly, the West, where Greek culture predominated. When Rome started making its looming appearance, the Empire was at first perceived only as the political background radiation of an already familiar civilization, whose influence had been received on many levels.

Soon, however, it became clear that this Empire offered unimagined opportunities. First of all, economically: the Roman world was an insatiable market for luxury goods of any kind and, as such, the key to the economic rise of Palmyra. After that, socially as well: one could become a Roman citizen, perhaps even a member of the equestrian or senatorial order, and so, at least symbolically, sit at the table of the powerful in distant Rome. At home, Roman legal and social titles could be directly converted into status and prestige. From a certain point onwards, at least from Hadrian's time, anyone who wanted to make something of themselves had to be a Roman citizen. From what we know, the Palmyrene elites were determined to obtain their place in the Empire. In the Hellenistic East, the rules of the game had been carved in stone since the time of Alexander's successors: in order to achieve status and prestige, one accessed networks, and tried to outdo rivals by constantly showcasing one's skills.⁴²

The Palmyrenes went about it no differently from the elites of other cities in the Hellenistic East. Their own field of competition was the local group of Syrian cities: Emesa, Apameia, Tyre and above all Antioch. To this purpose they built a

theatre and sanctuaries, which stood up to any comparison with the most splendid temples of the Roman world, to this purpose they took so much care to honour their deserved citizens in Greek language, and for the same reason they competed for the longest colonnaded street. That the magnificent street lined with porticoes was a decidedly regional achievement of urban planning and had its origins neither in Italy nor in Greece, did not bother the Palmyrenes in the least. A city's fame was measured in the competition with its neighbouring cities, rather than with Rome or Athens. The concept of an elongated forum,⁴³ as it was developed in the East, on which one could walk, trade and talk under shady arcades, proved to be so successful, that it was taken up in Constantinople itself, the new capital of the Empire founded by Constantine the Great.⁴⁴ The Antiochian orator Libanius went so far as to consider boulevards indispensable catalysts of the public sphere, without which a city could not exist.⁴⁵

Not least, in order to shine in their rivalry with other elites of the region, they devised innovative concepts of self-representation, which had no direct precedent in the western world. The burial structures, classified by archaeologists as temple or house tombs, which had richly structured façades reminiscent of Roman temple fronts and which, in the first half of the second century AD, apparently all of a sudden replaced the older tower tombs, offered the desired space for representation.⁴⁶ They were adorned with statues and pictures, and were above all a reminder that their builders perfectly mastered the canon of western building traditions, even though they misapplied it. The emergence of the new tomb type in close proximity to Hadrian's visit to Palmyra is certainly no coincidence. This period marks a profound transformation for Palmyra in several respects. After the Roman retreat from Mesopotamia, the city gained a pivotal function in the Roman East's political architecture. Roman military were garrisoned in Palmyra, while at the same time more and more Palmyrenes served under the Roman eagle all over the Empire. While the East was headed for peace, the Palmyrenes brought in a rich peace dividend in the form of an unprecedentedly flourishing long-distance trade. This unique economic situation for the city was honoured by the emperor himself, who ennobled Palmyra with his visit in AD 130, conferring on it at the same time the prestigious title *Hadrianē*, thus elevating it among its Syrian rivals.⁴⁷

This meant that the elites of the trading city had reached what they had aspired to. Their city was no longer a tiny spot on the imaginary map of the great Empire, but a brightly shining lighthouse, while the other cities of Syria stood, at least for the moment, in its shadow. In this sense, Palmyra was indeed a *cité grecque*, a Greek polis in competition and in close connection with others. Yet this is only a preliminary solution to the Palmyra puzzle. The question of how it was possible for Palmyra to fill the power vacuum of AD 260, is joined by the problem of the cultural hiatus, which existed deep down between the oasis and the Greco-Roman world. The world of symbols can only be decoded and understood if we get to the bottom of Palmyra's social structure. For this, two aspects of Palmyra's life will be examined, focusing on what essentially distinguishes it from other cities of the Empire and sets it typologically apart from them: Palmyra's active role in long-distance trade and the dominant social function of genealogy.

Caravans

The great institutions of “temple” and “palace” had a powerful impact on the urban societies of early Mesopotamia. They collected duties from the peasants and distributed them among the agriculturally unproductive urban population. Although, contrary to long-standing beliefs, they did not have a monopoly on every form of exchange of goods, the cities of Ancient Near East represented, in many respects, Weber’s “consumers’ city.” The city did not create its livelihood by itself. Dependent largely on redistribution, it was, rather, a parasite of the surrounding countryside.⁴⁸

The same was the case with most cities of classical Greek and Roman antiquity. Here, it was not the great institutions, but private individuals living in the city, who owned land in the countryside and pocketed returns from it: the notables. The notables’ revenues flowed into the city, where they were consumed. In Rome, the role of notables was played by the *princeps*, who oversaw the regular importation of huge quantities of grain from his personal possessions in Egypt, creating at the same time, with his court, an almost insatiable demand for all sorts of goods. Similarly, for the elites in the provinces as well, displaying their status through conspicuous consumption was an essential element of their self-representation as notables. The mass of countless cities scattered across the Empire corresponded typologically to the consumers’ city.⁴⁹

Yet there were exceptions to the rule. The cities of the Phoenician Levant, as seen above,⁵⁰ had specialized in long-distance trade during the Iron Age, and lived on its margins, as well as on the output of manufacturing. In the Roman Empire, there were perhaps still a dozen cities whose economic base consisted of service provisions and exports, counting such highly specialized cities as the port of Ostia, the centre for pottery production Arretium (Arezzo), and the island polis of Delos, home of the largest slave market in the Mediterranean world. Apart from such specializations, which were often the result of specific historical or ecological conditions, it was apparently mainly its position within the transport network, which decided whether an ancient city had the potential to become a producers’ city. If it lay by the sea, as the Phoenician cities did, being at the same time at the crossroads between dissimilar markets (in this case between those of the highly urbanized and economically differentiated Near East and those of the underdeveloped Mediterranean world) then the most important prerequisite was fulfilled. If, at the same time, there was only little or low-quality arable land available, the city residents were virtually predestined to indulge in manufacturing and long-distance trade.

Did these prerequisites exist in Palmyra? Palmyra does not lie by the sea, but rather, if the Syrian Desert can be described as such, in the middle of a sea of sands. Anyone coming from the Mediterranean wanting to reach the Euphrates at Dura-Europos or Hīt, will inevitably have to pass through the oasis of Tadmur. Is this enough, however, to determine a favourable transport position? For the traffic between the middle Euphrates and the Mediterranean coast, there were, further north, several alternative, much easier to tread, and, most importantly, shorter

routes leading from Zeugma to Antioch. But even this trade route was in direct competition with the long-established southern route to India, which ran over the Nile and the Egyptian Red Sea ports.⁵¹ This route raises its own logistical and nautical problems, but as Palmyra's long-distance trade began to flourish around the beginning of the first century AD, it had been in use for centuries. That it was worthwhile to maintain the complex infrastructure for the passage of the Egyptian Desert and the Red Sea, is probably due to the low political hurdles. Those landing in Berenike or Myos Hormos had the desert ahead, but no potentially hostile states. Therefore, it is a sufficiently plausible working hypothesis to assume that it was not the long-distance trade that created the conditions for the existence of Palmyra, but that rather the already flourishing city succeeded in diverting the flow of long-distance trade, so that it passed through the oasis.⁵²

Did Palmyra have the prerequisites for a landowning elite, analogous to the notables in most cities of the Roman world? The oasis offers ideal conditions for intensive irrigation. However, its surface of barely 30 square kilometres is much too small to feed a large city, even when the best practices of land use are applied. By comparison, during the classical period, even small Greek poleis had a *chōra*, a farming area of about 100 square kilometres.⁵³ It has been known for a long time that even outside the territory of the Tadmur oasis, sedentary agriculture took place. The soil around Palmyra is very fertile, and in many areas, especially in the wadis, there is sufficient humidity to farm the land without artificial irrigation, even under pre-modern conditions. Extensive surveys carried out before the civil war have also proved that in ancient times, great efforts were made to irrigate farmland artificially. All sorts of Qanates, dams, water pipes and cisterns were set up in the Palmyrene as part of a watering system covering an extensive area.⁵⁴ Pollen analysis show that large parts of the Palmyrene were indeed used for agriculture.⁵⁵ The archaeological data convincingly support the interpretation of the tax tariff, according to which the exchange of goods between Palmyra and its surrounding area was of a considerable volume, and that foodstuffs played an important role in it.

Was Palmyra's urban boom indeed due to agriculture and not to trade? Did the ascent of the oasis to a city chronologically precede the long-distance trade, the city itself being as much as the precondition for the caravans to take the route via Palmyra instead of via northern Syria? Was a class of landowning notables the driving force behind the rise of the city – and consequently also the engine of the long-distance trade, which expanded from the first century? The reason why this assumption does not work out is chronology. We know from the most recent archaeological field work in Palmyra's Hellenistic city, that the oasis was involved in long-distance trade from the time of the earliest durable material which was found at Tadmur.⁵⁶ At the beginning of the second century, Palmyra was in close commercial relationship with Mesopotamia and the Mediterranean. On the other hand, indications that the Palmyrene was used for farming beyond the territory of the oasis, go back only to the first century AD, stretching from then continuously until the Umayyad period. The existence of an originally landed class of notables can thus be excluded.⁵⁷

If agriculture cannot account for the decisive impetus which triggered Palmyra's growth, the only plausible explanation left is long-distance trade. As far as the evidence suggests, the volume of commercial exchange through Palmyra increased substantially in the timespan between the second century BC and the second century AD, but apparently this growth took place in intermittent bursts.⁵⁸ The first upswing came as a result of the partition of the Syro-Mesopotamian area into two power blocks, initially into the Parthian and the Seleucid Empires (from 129 BC onwards), later into the Parthian Empire and Rome (from 53 BC onwards). A third phase of growth started with Germanicus' visit in AD 19 and from then on, with Rome's manifest presence in the oasis. A true economic boom was set in motion by the stability, which dominated the Fertile Crescent from the beginning of Hadrian's reign in AD 117, ending only with the Sasanian accession to power in AD 224.

How does all this fit together? What was Palmyra capable of offering, which alternative routes could not? The key can only lie in the Palmyrenes themselves, who obviously commanded a resource which was scarce elsewhere. This resource was, as recently pointed out by Eivind Heldaas Seland in a pioneering study on the Palmyrene long-distance trade, their stupendous ability to network. Contacts with Mesopotamia apparently existed by the early second century BC, when trade relations between the oasis and Babylonia were established. They proved so durable that they survived the political eruptions of the years 129 and 53 BC unharmed. While everywhere around, the exchange of goods was coming to a standstill, Palmyra became the bottleneck of trade between the territories on both sides of the Euphrates. That the Palmyrene merchants apparently enjoyed a high amount of trust in the Parthian Empire, may have been due not least to their relative equidistance between the empires of the West and the East, as it has been reported by Pliny in the first century AD.⁵⁹ The Palmyrenes were not perceived as Rome's agents, even if they were, like one Šo'adū, who had consecrated a temple to the Augusti in Vologesia in Hadrian's period or early in that of Antoninus Pius, loyal subjects of the Roman emperors.⁶⁰

The picture becomes even more complicated through the multi-layered stratigraphy of power in the corridor of the steppe frontier between the empires. The difficulties arising if we try to allocate individual territories, such as Osroene or Charakene, to one of the two power blocs probably reflect the ambiguity of the political situation at large.⁶¹ The Palmyrenes seem to have orientated and asserted themselves in this jungle in a masterful fashion. It was certainly no accident that Germanicus entrusted the Palmyrenes with establishing diplomatic contacts with the rulers in the Parthian West, especially with the southern Babylonian kingdom of Charakene.⁶² The Palmyrenes had a very active trading diaspora in various cities of the Parthian heartland, including Vologesias, Babylon and Seleukeia, all in Babylonia, but also in autonomous territories, such as Dura-Europos and especially Charakene. There, Palmyrenes were active in the cities of Forat and Spasinou Charax. They had also bases on various islands in the Persian Gulf: on Kharg, off the coast of modern Iran,⁶³ and further south on "Thiluana" (Sumerian Dilmun, Greek Tylos, modern Bahrain). This island was at least

temporarily managed by Charakene. Ironically, in Hadrian's time, a citizen of the city of *Hadrianē* Palmyra held the office of governor (*satrapēs*) of Thiluaana in the service of king Meeredates, who had been invested with power by the Parthians in Charakene: Yarḥai, son of Nebuzabad, was honoured, in AD 131, by the Palmyrene merchants of Spasinou Charax on Palmyra's Agora.⁶⁴ This Yarḥai is a key witness to the inextricable interweaving between Palmyra, the Parthian Empire, its autonomous territories and kingdoms, and the Roman Empire.⁶⁵

Due to the permanent presence of a numerically strong Palmyrene trading diaspora there, Mesopotamia practically became Palmyra's antechamber in the Parthian Empire, serving, at the same time, as its gateway to India. The route from Palmyra to India and the rhythms of the long-distance trade have now been convincingly reconstructed. Starting from the assumption that under the conditions of the "biological ancien régime"⁶⁶ any kind of mobility was dependent on natural geographical parameters,⁶⁷ the caravans must have left Palmyra in the summer (July/August). At this time of the year, the camels and dromedaries were in their summer pastures in the Palmyrene, the desert was dry and easily passable along natural or artificially laid watering places. Leaving Palmyra, the caravans took a south-easterly direction, following the Wādī Ḥaurān on the last section, reaching, after about 14 days, Hīt on the Euphrates, where the goods were loaded on rafts or barges.⁶⁸ From Hīt downstream, the river was navigable, so that the ports of the Persian Gulf could be reached in another 14 days. For the passage through the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean, the ships needed about a month. Because of the strong south-west monsoon, the ports along the Indian west coast could not be approached before September. Since November was out of the question for the passage, sailors were left a time slot of only two months (September/October) to reach their destination port in India. Merchants on their way from Egypt to India had to travel much longer. They left the Red Sea ports in July, waiting for the summer monsoon in the Indian Ocean, which starts in mid-August, to arrive in India probably at the end of September, certainly before November.⁶⁹

On the Indian subcontinent, there is no material evidence, which could directly confirm the local presence of Palmyrene merchants. The presence of merchants from the West, however, is recorded by the Muziris papyrus from the second century AD, a maritime loan granted for a shipload to be transported via Egypt into the Mediterranean.⁷⁰ Indirect reference to merchants reaching India through the Mesopotamian route is provided by glazed Parthian pottery, which has been found along the Indian west coast.⁷¹ Evidence found in Palmyra itself, though, is unequivocal. Two caravan inscriptions mention ships belonging to certain individuals named in the genitive.⁷² According to their names, whether owners, captains, or both, these people were undoubtedly Palmyrenes. They had arrived from "Scythia,"⁷³ meaning from India. A third inscription from Koptos mentions Palmyrene *nauklēroi*: ship owners running ships in the Red Sea.⁷⁴ Furthermore, representations of ships found in Palmyra suggest that Palmyrenes were not only caravan merchants, but experienced sailors as well. All these documents date back to the second century AD. Perhaps, Palmyrenes integrated the sea route relatively

late into their long-distance trade network, at a time when the caravan trade across Mesopotamia was firmly in their hand.

What kind of infrastructure waited for the Palmyrene merchants in the ports of the Indian west coast is not known for certain due to lack of evidence. It is quite possible that they – like their colleagues from Egypt – cooperated with countrymen who had settled there permanently. Considering how mercantile networks from other periods and other parts of the world, such as the Hanseatic League, or the Phoenician long-distance trade, function,⁷⁵ it is hard to believe that there was no Palmyrene diaspora in India. In any case, seafaring merchants must have spent quite some time in the Indian port cities, probably stopping at several places in one trip. From the middle of October, the weather conditions were favourable for the return journey to Spasinou Charax, which took at least one month. The time slot for the return lasted till March. During the winter months, the camel herds were on their pastures in Babylonia, so that enough animals were available for transport along the Euphrates and then again through the Syrian Desert. An additional month was needed for this journey, so that under favourable conditions, the passage from India to Palmyra lasted two months. In early spring, the goods arrived at the Agora in Palmyra.⁷⁶ Sailors of the Red Sea route, on the other hand, had to plan much more carefully. They could not leave India before the winter monsoon started in October: by February, however, they had to have reached the mouth of the Red Sea, before the wind stagnancy of the spring months set in.⁷⁷ Until the goods reached Alexandria, again several months had to go by. First there was the Egyptian Desert between the Red Sea and Koptos to be overcome, and from there the nautically challenging Nile had to be dealt with, which was hardly navigable in the spring months, and only offered ideal conditions from the start of August. Therefore, the merchandise travelling along the Red Sea route probably arrived in Alexandria when the season for safe navigation in the Mediterranean was already nearing its end.⁷⁸ This is precisely the leading edge of Palmyra's business model: the Palmyrenes were able to supply the Mediterranean markets with their goods in the spring, right at the start of the navigation season.

From the Palmyrene point of view, the route had another advantage too. Between their oasis and the Persian Gulf, they were the only suppliers. While on the Red Sea route, where they were also involved, they had to share the profit with numerous other competitors. Nabataeans, Greeks, Egyptians, Arabs from Arabia Felix in present-day Yemen, Axumites from the Horn of Africa and Indians from various regions of the subcontinent were all engaged in the long-distance trade plying the great hub of the Indian Ocean.⁷⁹ Accordingly, on this route the Palmyrenes' slice of the cake was rather small. On the Mesopotamian route, on the other hand, despite trading the same goods, the merchants from the oasis got nearly all of the cake. The goods circulating in the Persian Gulf are mentioned in the *Periplus Maris Erythraei*. Instead of Spasinou Charax, it refers to the neighbouring port of Apologos, which was apparently closely connected with the port cities of Barygaza (in India) and Omana (on the Arabian Peninsula, probably el-Dur in the United Arab Emirates), both cited in the *Periplus*. According to the treatise, the Barygaza market in India traded above

all in goods which were sought after in the Mediterranean, like spikenard, *kostos* (an oil-containing rhizome), guggul resin (a kind of rubber), ivory, onyx, carnelian, myrrh, lycium (a nightshade plant), cotton and silk textiles, silk yarn and pepper.⁸⁰ Other goods circulating in the regional system were traded as well, such as local textiles, slaves, wine, dates and pearls from the Persian Gulf.⁸¹ The Indian market demanded, in return, Italian wine, copper, tin, lead, corals, chrysolith (a mineral), robes, storax (a resin similar to incense), honey clover, raw glass, red orpiment (also a mineral), antimony, gold and silver coins, ointments, silverware, musicians and “pretty girls for the harem.”⁸² By and large, the same range of goods were traded via Egypt and the Red Sea as well, therefore it can be assumed that the portfolio of Palmyrene caravan merchants did not look much different. Considerable quantities of textiles, including cotton and silk, have survived in Palmyra’s dry desert climate.⁸³ Other goods were less permanent because they were consumables. That incense was omnipresent in the city, however, is shown by numerous reliefs depicting thymiateria, on which sacrificial rituals were carried out. Wine from the Mediterranean entered the oasis in large quantities as well, as amphorae findings indicate. The wine may have been brought in predominantly for the local market, some of it, though, must have been traded further down in the Persian Gulf and towards South Asia.⁸⁴

While the goods traffic between Palmyra and India is comparatively well attested in the inscriptions, the epigraphic sources are tight-lipped regarding the connecting route to the West, between the oasis and the Mediterranean. There is no information on the trade’s itinerary, nor on the destination ports of the Mediterranean, nor on the players carrying out this trade. It has even been called into question that the goods traded over Palmyra were destined for the Mediterranean area at all, being consumed instead predominantly in the Syrian inland cities themselves.⁸⁵ For one, as we have seen, the premise lying at the basis of such an assumption, that the Palmyrene route was not competitive against the Red Sea passage, is incorrect. Furthermore, it is the demanding logistics of the Palmyrene trade which strongly suggest that the goods were destined for a large market with a high purchasing power, and this could most likely be offered by the Roman Empire at large. The path to Damascus was well built and is perfectly documented also through the *Tabula Peutingeriana*,⁸⁶ it was certainly not practical for the goods traffic, however, because of the mountain chains of the Anti-Lebanon/Hermon and Lebanon to the west of Damascus, which would have to be crossed. The Mediterranean was better accessible via Emesa, across the Homs gap between Jabal al-Anṣārīya and the Lebanon (200 kilometres), or alternatively, via Apameia or Chalkis and Antioch (250 to 300 kilometres). Each of these routes required at most ten days’ travel.⁸⁷

Who handled this trade? The Palmyrenes themselves? If this had been the case, then it is quite remarkable that the transport of goods between the Mediterranean and the oasis is nowhere documented in Palmyra. It is therefore conceivable that the Palmyrenes were engaged exclusively in long-distance trade on the Mesopotamian route, ceding the passage to the Mediterranean, which was less profitable and by far less challenging, regarding know-how and networking

capabilities, to third parties. While this problem invites no end of speculation, other questions can be answered. How was Palmyra's long-distance trade organized? What was the role played by "government" institutions, how large was the proportion of individuals involved in it?

Institutions

Such considerations lead directly to the question of how society was organized in the oasis. Who were the people of influence in Palmyra? Where did the elites come from? And what role did they play in the long-distance trade, which, after all, was the metropolis' economic *raison d'être*. The examination will focus on the kinds of institutions existing in the city and the degree of its institutionalization. The model of the occidentalists will be reviewed, according to which Palmyra was also institutionally a "*cité grecque*," having an equivalent range of bodies and laws shaping the political field in the same way as they did in any Greek city of the Hellenistic or Roman period. The question is, was Palmyra such a "city-state"? Was Palmyra a state at all? The definition of a city-state proposed by Mogens Hermann Hansen for a comparative research project offers suitable criteria to be used for a review of the occidental hypothesis. Accordingly, a city-state is:⁸⁸

a highly institutionalized and centralized micro-state, consisting of a city and its immediate surroundings, and has the following features:

- a stratified society of citizens, foreigners and (sometimes) slaves,
- a clear-cut territory, the centre of which can be normally reached from anywhere in a day's march,
- an elite which is so small, that it functions as a face-to-face society,
- a population which regards itself as related to the ethnically surrounding city-states, but draws its political identity from the affiliation with its own city-state, and
- lives, to a considerable extent, in the city itself, and partly in the countryside, in villages and scattered settlements,
- has an economy based on the division of labour, for which the urban market plays a central role towards the satisfaction of the needs of large sections of the population.

Many of these criteria are undeniably fulfilled in imperial Palmyra. The oasis metropolis possessed a complex economy, for which the urban market played a decisive role; society was differentiated and stratified; there were, distinctively, elites and non-elites. Furthermore, Palmyra was a political entity consisting of the city and its surroundings, with a significant part of the population living in the city. Here, however, the similarities come to an end and problems start to arise. Palmyra's territory was so large that people could not reach the city from anywhere within a day's march. Although in the north and west, Palmyra bordered with other political entities, which could be described as city-states (Apameia and, at a pinch, Emesa), towards the east and south it had an open, not clearly

defined frontier. The question as to whether the city was the primary reference point of its inhabitants' political identity, will be discussed in more detail later.⁸⁹ In accordance with Hansen's definition, the elites were certainly a face-to-face society. Apart from that, though, they did not resemble the notables of Greek and Roman cities in the slightest.

We have observed how actively Palmyra took part in the competition between Syria's cities, and how the social practice of awarding honours to fellow citizens of merit with inscriptions and statues prevailed in the city. Palmyra was "Greek" insofar as it had developed a competitive ethics, which was effective both internally and externally. We have also seen that from the late first century AD onwards, Palmyra introduced magistracies, committees and institutions based on the model of Greek poleis. Even though the meaning of almost all these offices is beyond our knowledge, the *dēmos* and the *boulē* undeniably had decision-making powers. They could order honorific inscriptions to be put up,⁹⁰ or decide upon such important a legal act as the tax tariff.⁹¹ For now, everything points to the speedy Hellenization of the urban institutions from the first century AD onwards. In the Near East, Hellenization meant at the same time Romanization. By transforming itself institutionally into a polis, which administered itself autonomously, the city became compatible with the structures of the Empire, which was basically perceived as a confederacy of cities.

To be sure, the example of the Roman Republic teaches that an extremely complex "political grammar"⁹² can be found behind such constitutional structures, which are articulated in offices, the rules concerning how to access them, and the legal powers of the magistrates. The political system of the Republic would be quite inadequately described, if one were to focus only on its constitutional component. Equally important for its understanding is the social reality, which defines the scope of political institutions only at a sub-constitutional level.⁹³ Palmyra's social reality showed that the economic basis for a class of notables, as was typical of the Greek poleis and Roman *civitates*, did not exist in Palmyra. The oasis' elite was not a leisure class of landowners spending in town the gains derived from capital invested in farming.⁹⁴

If Palmyra's notables were no landowners, what were they then? The next choice obviously falls on the long-distance trade. In fact, a considerably large corpus of the Palmyrene honorific decrees is connected with the caravans. Important personalities are honoured for the favours they have done to merchants. In part, such favours have to do with the execution of bureaucratic formalities in the Parthian Empire, such as the payment of duties,⁹⁵ in part with financial contributions,⁹⁶ with the rescue from great danger,⁹⁷ or services rendered as a *synodiarchēs* or *synodiarchos* – a caravan leader, or, as they were called later, in the third century AD, as "chief merchant" (*archemporos*).⁹⁸ Most of the documents mention only unspecific reasons for the acts of awarding honours. Usually there is a simple statement, that the honorand had been "obliging in every respect" to the caravans.⁹⁹ In exceptional cases, inscriptions mention buildings which have been erected by the honorands at their own expense. There is mention of the Temple of Bēl at Palmyra,¹⁰⁰ the Temple of the Augusti

in Vologesias,¹⁰¹ and another unnamed sanctuary in Vologesias.¹⁰² The very detailed inscription for Šo‘adū from the year AD 145/146 emphasizes the incorruptibility (*pistis*) and generosity (*megalophrosynē*) of the honorand dealing with the power entrusted to him (*dynasteia*).¹⁰³

There are 34 documents, which can be marked in the narrower sense as caravan inscriptions. More than half (18) of them politely restrain from mentioning the cause for the awarding of honours. At best, they vaguely say something about “favours” or “assistance” given to the caravans. The others state, in part, more than one reason. Many of the inscriptions refer to the payment of money (6), financial contributions to the construction of temples (4), and services to the caravans by *synodiarchai* (4). One inscription mentions the handling of customs formalities in the Parthian Empire and another one the faultless exercise of duty as reasons for awarding the honours. Two inscriptions, though, explicitly give account of mortal dangers to the merchants involved, who could only be saved through the personal intervention of the honorands.

This finding is noteworthy in that it deviates significantly from how the awarding of honours was practised in the Greco-Hellenistic poleis. Here, as testified by the rich epigraphic record from Asia Minor,¹⁰⁴ notables were fundamentally honoured for specific euergetic commitments, mainly of a financial or otherwise material character. The benefactors donated grain, oil or incense to the temples, financed the construction or maintenance of public buildings, organized festivals and pulled strings higher up.¹⁰⁵ A good honorific decree had to display a valid reason for the award as a matter of course. Those awarding honours and the honorands factually sealed a deal, in which economic was exchanged for symbolic capital, money against honour, which in turn could be exchanged into other currencies, particularly influence, whether political or social.¹⁰⁶ The visualization of the act in public space was one exchange transaction among several. For us, in retrospect, it was the most important one, as it was the most long-lasting.

Inscriptions and statues, however, were not void of meaning and causality. They were embedded, instead, in a wide context of social activity. A Greek benefactor would have found it extremely unsatisfactory to be honoured for an unmentioned service. The Palmyrenes did not. Apparently they were not interested in showcasing the services they had done to the community. Probably no Greek city boasted so many honorific statues in the public space as Palmyra did. If statues of citizens of merit stood on each of the countless plinths along the colonnaded streets, in courtyards, and even on temples’ facades, then visitors must have walked through an outright forest of statues, as soon as they set foot in the city. Again, this fact gives cause for perplexity. While the awarding of honours in the public space was almost inflationary, the motives for awarding them seem to have been of secondary importance. Of the inscriptions which explicitly mention the reasons for the awarding of honours, only a few quote the construction of buildings, exclusively temples. That caravan inscriptions are not related to the distribution of grain and oil is not surprising. But in Palmyra, food donations seem of little importance across the whole epigraphic record. An exception proving the rule is the inscription for Malēs Agrippa, who provided

Hadrian's entourage during the imperial visit of AD 130 with food, and took upon himself the catering for citizens of Palmyra and strangers alike.¹⁰⁷ The situation here, however, was certainly exceptional. Apart from this case, it was unusual for the Palmyrenes to be honoured for these kinds of services. Expenditures for caravans, declaration of goods, leading caravans, and, above all, averting danger, which can only be understood as defence against hostile attacks – all these are specifically Palmyrene motives for being honoured publicly.¹⁰⁸

The public character of the honorific decrees raises questions as well. The statues were put up in a space which is considered, at least by modern classicists, as "public." Only a small part of the honorific inscriptions, however, were set up at the initiative of public institutions. Only six of the 34 caravan inscriptions were awarded by the "*boulē* and people" of Palmyra. They are all comparatively late testimonies of the caravan trade, and, with the exception of two pieces from the AD 130s and 140s, all date back to the Severan period and later. For the rest of the inscriptions, those awarding honours are mostly groups of merchants, often including a whole caravan (*synodia* or *šyrt*) or a ship's crew, sometimes even entire tribes, and in several cases, especially in the older inscriptions, "the merchants dwelling in x," x indicating places of the Palmyrene trading diaspora in the Parthian Empire.¹⁰⁹

By Greek standards, the fact that "*boulē* and people" do not award honours at the initiative of third parties, but the third parties do it by themselves instead, is highly unusual. The identity of those awarding honours is even more astonishing. With only few exceptions, they are all merchants, while a direct association of the honorands with the caravan trade is only evident in cases where the addressees are explicitly honoured for their services as *synodiarchs*. The unavoidable conclusion drawn from the stock of caravan inscriptions six decades ago by French historian Ernest Will was: not the merchants, but the group of addressees, were the elite in Palmyra, whose business was not the long-distance trade, but its patronage.¹¹⁰ Starting from the epigraphic record, Will constructed a three-tiered hierarchy, with the caravan merchants as the rank and file, the synodiarchs at the intermediate level, and a caste of omnipotent "*protecteurs de caravane*" at the top. Will saw in these men patrons and financiers of long-distance trade, but above all a military elite of warrior aristocrats, whose business was to guarantee the safety of trade routes. According to *habitus* and function, these men were, according to Will, "sheikhs in the Arabic sense of the word."¹¹¹

Against Will's model it can be argued that the boundaries between the merchants and their supposed patrons on the one hand, and between both groups and the synodiarchs on the other, are fluid. One and the same person, like Marcus Ulpius Yarḥai, who is named as honorand in eight successive inscriptions shortly after the middle of the second century AD, appears in several roles at the same time: as synodiarch, as helper in the declaration of goods, and as benefactor, although his services are not mentioned.¹¹² There was, therefore, probably no such clear distinction between the groups as presumed by Will, but surely there must have been a recognizable difference in status between individuals like Yarḥai, who boasted dozens of honorary statues across the town, and the merchants,

who remain mostly nameless. The addressees of the inscriptions are continually associated with financial services. As the Muziris papyrus indicates, the trade with India involved enormous sums, therefore raising the necessary capital for its funding was a serious challenge for the merchants, who could not provide these colossal amounts out of their own pockets. Accordingly, it is quite probable that one of the essential services of people like Marcus Ulpius Yarhai was to provide the caravans with sufficient capital. They fulfilled, thus, a function similar to that of the unknown lender, who is responsible for the transaction documented in the Muziris Papyrus.

The honorands' involvement with military tasks in general is also striking, and it contrasts with the record from other cities of the Roman world. It is clear that the caravan trade needed protection. The security of caravans was no responsibility of the Roman army.¹¹³ From the honorific decrees it can be inferred that this was carried out by private individuals who, in exchange for their commitment of financial means, sometimes even putting their life at stake, acquired social prestige, or in plain language, "honour."

How exactly was the protection of the caravans organized? In order to explain the fact that Palmyra was able to single-handedly guarantee the safety of the long-distance trade, the mainstream of Palmyra's researchers make use of a theoretical construct, which through frequent usage by now has largely acquired the quality of an historical fact. According to the model, from the first century AD, Palmyra had a "militia," or a "desert police," which exercised control over the Palmyrene. The militia was stationed at strategically important points, such as on the Euphrates, keeping the nomads in check, who otherwise would have been a considerable threat to the trade.¹¹⁴ Both assumptions are questionable. First, the sources do not even give a hint about a "desert police" made up of Palmyrenes, which would have guaranteed security in the Syrian Desert. Secondly, as seen above, the relations between nomads and sedentary populations were never purely antagonistic in the Near East. On the contrary, the interests of both groups were often in astonishing harmony with each other, and, not infrequently, long-distance trade flourished when nomads and sedentary people cooperated to each other's advantage. The construct of the "desert police" is part of the hermeneutic circle with which the occidentalists operate: if Palmyra is a polis, a "cité grecque" in the full extent of the word, then the safety of the caravans must also have its place in the institutional tableau of this city – namely, the polis must have had a military arm, analogous to the civic militias of the poleis in archaic and classical Greece.

Here the occidentalist prism reveals itself, through which the Palmyrene sources are refracted. The model is hardly plausible. First, such a civic militia would be fundamentally contradictory to the also-alleged normality of Palmyra as a Greek city among other Greek cities in the Roman Near East. None of these other cities had a "militia," none of them was responsible for their own security, not to mention them being able to maintain peace and order over an area as vast as the one which was supposedly guarded by the "desert police." Second, the model of the "militia" is based on another, also circular, assumption: that at some point, the tribes, which are repeatedly mentioned in the Palmyrene texts,

mutated to “city tribes,” analogous to the *phylai* in Kleisthenes’s Athens.¹¹⁵ The proposition was prompted by a handful of inscriptions from the second century AD, which speak of the “four tribes,” one of the inscriptions mentioning the “four tribes of the city.”¹¹⁶

That Palmyra’s tribal structure was changing in the final quarter of the second century, is not to be denied. The evidence does not suggest, however, that the tribes were artificial sub-divisions of a supposed polis of Palmyra, nor that the existence of this polis preceded the assumed institutionalization of such tribes. Such conclusions can only be drawn by relying on the premise that the Kleisthenian system was the sole model of governance in ancient cities, and by largely ignoring the pre-Hellenistic history of the steppe frontier and its natural habitat. We are totally in the dark as to how the “four tribes” emerged, what role they played in the identity formation of the Palmyrenes, and whether they represented all inhabitants, or only a part of them. Trying to identify the tribes involves insurmountable difficulties.¹¹⁷

Identities

We should get rid of such paradigms as “civic tribes” and “desert police” for good. There is an alternative explanation, which raises fewer heuristic problems and considers city and steppe, sedentary population and nomads, not as antagonistic, but as an inseparable unity. If we regard the inhabitants of the Palmyrene as a polymorphic society, in which, much like today, traditional tribal identities do not necessarily correspond to determined lifestyles, a much more plausible model of Palmyra and its long-distance trade emerges. The tribes in Palmyra were no artificial sub-divisions of the polis, as they were in classical Athens, but communities with a shared identity, whose social impact was by no means compromised by the fact that the supposed kinship between the members within the tribe was merely imaginary. In all tribal societies, the bond of imaginary kinship between the tribe’s members provides protection in a social space where structures of government and state are largely absent. In any tribal society there is unconditional solidarity between all the members of the tribe. In conflicts with rival groups, each tribe member can absolutely rely on the assistance of his brethren, who will invariably retaliate any attack through vengeance. The overall management of the tribe lies in the hands of elders, who inherit their position from generation to generation. Operational leadership, however, is flexibly assigned to those who stand out through skill and merit, especially in times of war.

The difficult and potentially conflict-laden relationship between tribal solidarity on the one hand and government institutions on the other, is highlighted by abundant evidence from the modern Near East. Here, interpersonal ties based on kinship prove their continued efficacy within the dysfunctional shells of states, manifesting themselves in metastasizing “corruption,” at least as it is seen from the point of view of Western societies. That the Palmyrene society apparently ran smoothly in the second century AD, suggests that the Romans wisely abstained from forcefully implementing the institutions of a polis in Palmyra.

It is also unlikely that out of the blue, the Palmyrenes simply decided to transform their tribal communities of identity into “civic tribes,” abandoning their tribal identity in favour of an urban one. Much more plausible seems another scenario: urbanization and the city’s gradual integration into the Roman Empire created in Palmyra itself a need for institutions. In order to absorb tensions between this new frame and the traditions of tribal society, the Palmyrenes adopted a method already used masterfully by them in other fields: in art, religion and language. The hierarchies and codes, which ruled how people should live together within the tribe, were “translated” into the language of the polis. Accordingly, tribal warlords were now called *stratēgoi*, the gathering of tribal elders became the *boulē*. The Palmyrenes accomplished this act so brilliantly, that the original tribal patterns are hardly recognizable behind the terminology. If this interpretation is correct, then the primary point of reference for the political identity of the Palmyrenes was not the polis, but the tribe, as it had always been. With this, the most important criterion of Hansen’s definition of the polis is not met by Palmyra, the city being no “cité grecque” at all.

A pivotal function in this process of translation was played by the tribal elites. Using the agency of their Roman citizenship, their representatives connected Palmyra with the great world of the Empire. They literally translated their local status into the language of the Empire, by composing most of the honorific inscriptions in two languages, making it clear for every person, whichever background they came from, who had the say in Palmyra. On the other hand, they bridged the gap between the world of the city and that of the steppe, serving as a link between the urban and the nomadic segments within the tribe. All the different tribes, as well as their sedentary and non-sedentary subgroups were held together by their common interest in the long-distance trade. In this balance, the city benefited from the extraordinary mobility of the steppe nomads. The nomads are, therefore, the missing link in the network of the Palmyrenes. Their transhumance knew no imperial frontiers, their idea of politics was not territorial, but strictly defined by categories of kinship. The paths plied by the nomads were the threads webbing the Palmyrene trading network on both sides of the border with the Parthian Empire.

This model also explains Palmyra’s military power, its ability to ensure security in the desert, to provide order on the strip around Dura-Europos after the Parthians’ withdrawal, and finally to fill the power vacuum after Valerian’s defeat in AD 260. As demonstrated by the example of Mari,¹¹⁸ nomads embody a military potential that can be activated in no time, compared to which the civic militia of any polis would cut a poor figure. In the eyes of tribal societies, there are no “civilians.” Basically, all full members of the tribe are able to defend themselves, women and children too in case of emergency. Tribes command a military know-how equally appreciated and feared by the governments of the sedentary people. Units of nomadic warriors serve in armies of imperial powers like Rome, but they can also destroy empires, as the Muslim Arabs did with the Persian Empire of the Sasanians at the beginning of their expansion.¹¹⁹ That the nomads put their potential into the service of the caravans and not against them, can be explained

through the profit margins offered by the Palmyrene business pattern. Of course, not all of them were in the boat. Insubordinate steppe dwellers, for their part, scented their chances, intending to participate illegally in the long-distance trade. Precisely such conflicts are highlighted by some of the caravan inscriptions.

The representatives of the Palmyrene elite are not to be thought of as indolent notables like the upper classes of the Greek poleis, but as formidable born fighters, who were able to see the caravans through various dangers: men like Marcus Ulpus Yarḥai, or the nameless tomb owner posing as a warlord of the desert on the lid of his sarcophagus and as a Roman magistrate on its front.¹²⁰ Although military expertise was part and parcel of their habitus, the political position of the elites was predominantly legitimized through tradition, namely by the position they occupied within the kinship network of the tribes. One did not become a great leader, one was born to it. Time and again, significant personalities came to prominence, claiming lots of public, but also symbolic, space for themselves. The city was open enough, though, to grant each of them the freedom to stage themselves. There was no monopoly on social prestige. The main function of the honorific decrees must have been to document the current value of tribes and their representatives in the public space. The Great Colonnade was the city's social barometer, making public how much political weight was carried by a kinship group. The practice may be the same as it was in the Greek polis – in the context of the polymorphic society of the oasis, however, it had a completely different meaning. At the same time, the awarding of honours formalized reciprocal relations of dependency between the merchants, who appear collectively, and the addressees as individuals. The elite members treat the merchants obligingly, expecting in return a reciprocal service. In principle, the practice is not dissimilar to the Roman client–patron relationship with the characteristic exchange of *beneficium* and *officium*. It would have been more than useful to know whether, as in Rome, the reciprocal bond between those awarding honours and the honorands reflected pre-existing close relations, namely, whether there was a relationship of tribal dependency between the merchants and their patrons. Caravans (*synodiai*) and ship crews are referred to as collectives in the inscriptions. Were such collectives organized as permanent corporations? Caravan inscriptions do not provide any information about this. It seems, however, that the city did indeed know associations in which the members of certain professions were organized: the *marḥ*’, or *symposia*. We know about them mainly from the hundreds of *tesserae* found in Palmyra, which are decorated with representations of deities, and the buildings, which are interpreted as banquet halls.¹²¹ The *marḥ*’ were certainly religious institutions, but were they merely religious? If the inscriptions talk of the *symposion* of tanners (*skyteoi*), leather-raft-makers (*askonautopoioi*), goldsmiths (*chrysochooi*) and silversmiths (*argyrokopoi*), as well as other, similarly idiosyncratic branches of trade, then there is reason to suspect that the *marḥ*’ were professional associations as well, similar to the *collegia* of the Latin-speaking world.¹²² Or were the *marḥ*’ rather, as equally suggested by the inscriptions’ terminology, groups based on the bonds of kinship or imaginary kinship?

The apparent confusion of concepts is likely to reflect the inextricable interconnection between spheres of life which, according to our understanding, should be neatly separated from each other. In no ancient society, however, was religion an autonomous sphere, which could be separated from other “non-religious” sectors. In Palmyra, this applies to kinship relations as well. These relations permeate society on all levels, showing their presence even where they are not expected, such as in the field of professions. It is therefore unlikely, that the identity-forming force of kinship would spare the institutions, though, according to the Greek understanding, they should have had a purely political, “civic” character. To be sure, this assumption cannot be proven. It becomes more plausible, however, in the light of the episode concerning Odainat and Zenobia.

The Palmyrene was a cosmos of intricately overlapping identities and alterations, which were in a process of transition into the bargain. All the inhabitants of the area between the Euphrates and the Palmyra Chains shared the same, albeit relatively vague, identity as Palmyrenes. That the inhabitants of the steppe felt themselves to be part of it, is suggested by the designation of Roman archer units as “Palmyrenes.” The archers serving in the army must have been nomads rather than sedentary city-dwellers. Below the level of the all-inclusive group of the Palmyrenes, there was a sense of belonging together within the tribes. These changed their structure over time, in their role as identity communities of imagined kinship. However, they continued to constitute the primary reference point of political identity. The tribes were in continued competition with each other for honours and resources, their common interest in the long-distance trade, however, welded them together into a unit of action. Within the tribes, a gap opened up between the inhabitants of the steppe and the city dwellers, whose group included the sedentary and partly sedentary peasants of the Palmyrene as well. Here, too, the boundaries must have been flowing. The rift between steppe inhabitants and city dwellers, however, must have presumably deepened to the same extent as the latter began to feel as citizens of their city as well. This dynamic can be observed only sketchily. It is also unclear what kind of relationship existed between the identities of professional groups, such as those of the merchants, on the one hand, and kinship identities, which defined the structure of society, on the other. Did they go athwart, or did they at least partly run parallel to each other?

It is unmistakable that from AD 224, the new balance of power east of the Euphrates had a massive shock effect on Palmyrene society, unleashing enormous dynamics. Attempts have been made to explain the factually monarchic, monopolistic position attained by Odainat within a few years, as Palmyra’s “reorientalization.”¹²³ There was little to “reorientalize” in Palmyra. The oasis was home to a society in which the most heterogeneous elements had been inextricably intertwined from the very beginning. Palmyra was neither East, nor West, but both at the same time, and as such, not to be reorientalized. However, it is plausible that the old elites and their basis of legitimacy collapsed under the pressure of changing conditions. Capable men like Yarḥai could safely navigate caravans through the desert, the challenge brought about in Palmyra by Ardashir’s seizure of power, however, was simply too much for them. That is

why, in Palmyra's existential crisis, the time had come for a new kind of ruler, whose lifeblood was his charisma, acquired through his victories as a warrior. The old elites disappeared from the public stage. It now belonged solely to Odinat, his family and his followers.

Notes

- 1 Hans-Joachim Gehrke, "Bemerkungen zu Hippodamos von Milet," in *Demokratie und Architektur. Der hippodamische Städtebau und die Entstehung der Demokratie*, ed. Wolfgang Schuller (München: Deutscher Kunstverlag, 1989); Joachim Szidat, "Hippodamos von Milet. Seine Rolle in Theorie und Praxis der griechischen Stadtplanung," *Bonner Jahrbücher* 180 (1980). On the Hippodamian town plan of Dura-Europos above, p. 45–6.
- 2 Christiane Kunst, *Leben und Wohnen in der römischen Stadt* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2006), 15–29.
- 3 Agnes Henning, "Individueller Anspruch und gesellschaftliche Orientierung. Veränderungen im Nekropolenbild Palmyras im Verlauf des 1. Jhs. n. Chr. am Beispiel der Turmgräber," in *Kulturkonflikte im Vorderen Orient an der Wende vom Hellenismus zur römischen Kaiserzeit*, ed. Klaus Stefan Freyberger, Agnes Henning and Henner von Hesberg, *Orient-Archäologie* (Rahden/Westfalen: Verlag Marie Leidorf, 2003), 96.
- 4 Andreas Schmidt-Colinet, "Palmyrenische Grabkunst als Ausdruck lokaler Identität(en). Fallbeispiele," in *Lokale Identitäten in Randgebieten des Römischen Reiches. Akten des internationalen Symposiums in Wiener Neustadt, 24.–26. April 2003*, ed. Andreas Schmidt-Colinet, *Wiener Forschungen zur Archäologie* (Wien: Phoibos, 2004), 193.
- 5 Marianne Tabaczek, *Zwischen Stoa und Suq. Die Säulenstraßen im Vorderen Orient in römischer Zeit unter besonderer Berücksichtigung von Palmyra*. Diss. phil. (Köln: Universität zu Köln, 2002), 17–22; from a general and comparative point of view: Arthur Segal, *From Function to Monument. Urban Landscapes of Roman Palestine, Syria and Provincia Arabia* (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 1997), 5–53, and now Claudia Bührig, "The stage of Palmyra. Colonnaded streets, spaces for communication and activities in the Eastern Roman Empire," in *Palmyrena. City, Hinterland and Caravan Trade between Orient and Occident*, ed. Jørgen Christian Meyer, Eivind Heldaas Seland and Nils Anfinset (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2016).
- 6 So far, no honorific statue has been found, not even in fragments. Had the statues been made of marble or another kind of stone, pieces, at least, would have been preserved. It is therefore likely that the statues were made of metal and were melted down in the late or post classical period.
- 7 The Transverse Colonnade can be dated by means of an inscription with some degree of certainty. Inv. 5 109 dates it to the year AD 110. The street must have been, therefore, under construction by this point. Cf. Tabaczek, *Zwischen Stoa und Suq*, 20–21.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 23–29. This section has remained unfinished. In its western part, 50 metres of the Great Colonnade are missing. In all likelihood, the section has been erected in the Antonine period. The oldest inscription (Inv. 3 26) dates to the year AD 158.
- 9 Perhaps the structure was roofed. Its construction is usually dated to the second century AD. Archaeologists have argued that its purpose was to camouflage a bend in the Great Colonnade. This argument has now been challenged. According to investigations, the structure is substantially more recent and could date to the third, or even the fourth century. See Tabaczek, *Zwischen Stoa und Suq*, 29–31.
- 10 The so-called Small Colonnade is little investigated. It is doubtful whether it offered access to an important building. Dating is also uncertain, but stylistic indications point into the third century AD. Cf. Tabaczek, *Zwischen Stoa und Suq*, 40–41 and Segal, *From Function to Monument*, 140–41.

- 11 The largest part of this section probably goes back to the first decades of the third century AD. On the dating Tabaczek, *Zwischen Stoa und Suq*, 37.
- 12 Adnan Bounni, “Vierzig Jahre syrische Ausgrabungen in Palmyra,” in *Palmyra. Kulturbegegnung im Grenzbereich*, ed. Andreas Schmidt-Colinet (Mainz: Philipp von Zabern, 2005).
- 13 PAT 0292 = CIS 3946 (Odainat) = Michał Gawlikowski, “Les princes de Palmyre,” *Syria* 62 (1985); no. 11 = IGLS 18 1,54; PAT 0293 = CIS 3947 (Zenobia) = IGLS 18 1,57. Cf. Simon Swain, “Greek into Palmyrene. Odaenathus as ‘corrector totius Orientis’?” *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 99 (1993): 157f; Jean-Baptiste Yon, *Les notables de Palmyre* (Beyrouth: Institut français d’archéologie du Proche-Orient, 2002), 122.
- 14 IGLS 18 1,298. Whether this building was a temple for the Roman imperial cult, is debated among scholars (pro: Bounni, “Vierzig Jahre,”¹⁹ uncertain: Denis Genequand, “De Rome à l’Islam. Recherches récentes sur le dit *Caesareum* de Palmyre,” *Studia Palmyrenskie* 12 (2013): 98–99). It is safe to say that there was such a sanctuary. Its existence is evidenced through an inscription from the Temple of Ba‘al-Šamen (IGLS 8 1,149).
- 15 Klaus Stefan Freyberger, *Die frühkaiserzeitlichen Heiligtümer der Karawanenstationen im hellenisierten Osten. Zeugnisse eines kulturellen Konflikts im Spannungsfeld zweier politischer Formationen* (Mainz: Philipp von Zabern, 1998), 83–87; Ernest Will, *Les Palmyréniens. La Venise des sables (I^{er} siècle avant – III^{ème} après J.-C.)* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1992), 140–41. The temple can be attributed with certainty to Ba‘al-Šamen (Palmyrene) and Zeus (Greek) respectively, thanks to a bilingual inscription (PAT 0197). The inscription also gives a *terminus ante quem* for its construction: the building had been completed by AD 132, and thus shortly after the visit of the emperor Hadrian. It may be older though. There was definitely a previous building dating back to the early first century AD. A passage of the inscription, according to which the temple is one of the sanctuaries of the “four tribes,” is mysterious (line 18). On this below, p. 199. On the connection of the Temple of Ba‘al-Šamen with the tribe of the *bn y m‘zyn*, and on the other deities worshipped in the sanctuary Ted Kaizer, *The Religious Life of Palmyra. A Study of the Social Patterns of Worship in the Roman Period* (Stuttgart: Steiner, 2002), 79–85. Besides Ba‘al-Šamen, the “Lord of the Heavens,” the inscriptions mention numerous other deities.
- 16 Presumably, the square was built simultaneously with the central section of the Great Colonnade. Cf. Tabaczek, *Zwischen Stoa und Suq*, 43–44.
- 17 Bounni, “Vierzig Jahre,”¹⁸.
- 18 The contradiction has been justly noted by Warwick Ball, *Rome in the East. The Transformation of an Empire* (London: Routledge, 2000), 305. On theatres in the eastern provinces in general: Enno Burmeister, *Antike griechische und römische Theater* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2006), 143–54. Diagonally opposite the theatre, on the northern side of the Great Colonnade, there is another monumental building. From the Tetrarchic period onwards, this was a large bathing compound. The previous use of the building, which was probably constructed in the second century and was substantially rebuilt in the late third, is not clear. Some scholars have speculated, with no compelling arguments, that this was the palace of Zenobia. Cf. Bounni, “Vierzig Jahre,”¹⁹; Rudolf Fellmann, “Der Palast der Königin Zenobia,” in *Palmyra. Geschichte, Kunst und Kultur der syrischen Oasenstadt*, ed. Erwin Maria Ruprechtsberger, *Linzer Archäologische Forschungen* (Linz: Druck- und Verlagsanstalt Gutenberg, 1987) ; Tabaczek, *Zwischen Stoa und Suq*, 156, note 651.
- 19 Bounni, “Vierzig Jahre,”^{18–19}. On the tax law above, p. 121–22.
- 20 Marion Meyer, “Bilder als Zeugnisse städtischer Identität in Palmyra?” in *Kulturkonflikte im Vorderen Orient an der Wende vom Hellenismus zur römischen Kaiserzeit*, ed. Klaus Stefan Freyberger, Agnes Henning and Henner von Hesberg,

- Orient-Archäologie (Rahden/Westfalen: Verlag Marie Leidorf, 2003), 278–80, draws the parallel to the representation of Palmyra's protective deity (*gād*) on a relief in Dura-Europos. Here the goddess, who is likewise depicted in the style of the Tyche of Antioch, is being crowned by a Nike. Her right foot rests on an aquatic deity, the symbol of the Efqa spring. In the same temple, the same individual dedicated a second relief representing the *gād* of Dura, a male god who is being crowned with a garland by a second male figure, who can be identified as Seleukos Nikator, the founder of Dura-Europos, where he was worshipped as a hero. According to Meyer (*ibid.*, 283), the two reliefs should be read “along the same lines”; they both refer to the foundation of the respective cities. Dura owes its existence to Seleukos Nikator; in the case of Palmyra, the beginnings are obscure. Hence the Efqa spring as the origin of all life in the oasis takes the place of a founder.
- 21 Construction of the peripteral temple on a podium in a trapezoid temenos began in the late first century AD. It was not completed before AD 180.
 - 22 The name “Temple of Nebu” is purely conventional, as a dominant role of this god cannot be proven. Like all sanctuaries in Palmyra, this temple, too, housed the cults of multiple deities, of whom many are not even known by name. Cf. Kaizer, *Religious Life*, 89–99.
 - 23 The dating of the Tripylon is uncertain. It may have been completed by the Severan period, perhaps also later. Cf. Tabaczek, *Zwischen Stoa und Suq*, 38.
 - 24 The hall has been interpreted as a banquet building used by religious confraternities: below, p. 201.
 - 25 Freyberger, *Die frühkaiserzeitlichen Heiligtümer*, 82–83. On the *ḥamāna* Paul Collart and Pierre Coupel, *Le petit Autel de Baalbek*, ed. Institut Français d'Archéologie de Beyrouth, vol. 98, Bibliothèque archéologique et historique (Paris: P. Geuthner, 1977), 105.
 - 26 A cella with a surrounding portico deep two spans, but with no columns where one would expect the inner row of columns (peristasis). According to Vitr. 3,3,8, this grand architectonic layout was first devised by the Hellenistic architect Hermogenes. Cf. Hans Lauter, *Die Architektur des Hellenismus* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1986), 185–88.
 - 27 Freyberger, *Die frühkaiserzeitlichen Heiligtümer*, 78–80.
 - 28 An inscription dated to the year AD 171 (PAT 2769) found in the compound calls the sanctuary the “House of Bēl.”
 - 29 Freyberger, *Die frühkaiserzeitlichen Heiligtümer*, 71–79; Ted Kaizer, ““Palmyre, cité grecque”? A question of coinage,” *Klio* 89 (2007): 50.
 - 30 Freyberger, *Die frühkaiserzeitlichen Heiligtümer*, 80–81.
 - 31 On this now in detail: Jörg Rüpke, *Pantheon. Geschichte der antiken Religionen*. München (C. H. Beck, 2016), 337–46.
 - 32 Hans Kloft, *Mysterienkulte der Antike. Götter, Menschen, Rituale*, 3rd ed. (München: Beck, 2006), 86; Giulia Sfameni Gasparro, “Mysteries and oriental cults. A problem in the history of religions,” in *The Religious History of the Roman Empire*, ed. John North and Simon Price, Oxford Readings in Classical Studies (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2011), 287–88.
 - 33 Jörg Rüpke, *Von Jupiter zu Christus. Religionsgeschichte in römischer Zeit* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2011), 174.
 - 34 Rudolph Kremer, *Glaube und Aberglaube. Wie aus Religion und Superstition ein Gegensatz wurde* (Marburg: Tectum Verlag, 2016), 83–97; Sarolta A. Takács, *Isis and Sarapis in the Roman World*, vol. 124, Religions in the Graeco-Roman world (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 76.
 - 35 Rüpke, *Jupiter*, 159.
 - 36 Cic. nat. deor. 2,70–72.
 - 37 Cass. Dio 80,11,1.

- 38 Juv. 3,61–64.
- 39 IG 14,971. Cf. Blair Fowlkes-Childs, “Palmyrenes in Transtiberim. Integration in Rome and links to the eastern frontier,” in *Rome and the Worlds beyond its Frontiers*, ed. Danielle Sloomjes and Michael Peachin, Impact of Empire (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 201–02.
- 40 On the Palmyrenes in Rome and their sanctuary: Taco T. Terpstra, “The Palmyrene temple in Rome and Palmyra’s trade with the west,” in *Palmyrena. City, Hinterland and Caravan Trade* ed. Meyer, Seland and Anfinset, who interprets them as an ethnic community in the role of a classic “trading diaspora.”
- 41 Meyer, “Bilder als Zeugnisse,” 282.
- 42 Thus, with good arguments, Nathanael J. Andrade, *Syrian Identity in the Greco-Roman World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 186–87.
- 43 Bührig, “The stage of Palmyra,” 72.
- 44 The 25-metre-wide Mese (“central street”) lead from the Milion near the Hagia Sophia to the Golden Gate. Cf. Cyril A. Mango, “The triumphal way of Constantinople and the Golden Gate,” *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 54 (2000).
- 45 Liban. or. 11,197.
- 46 The subterranean tombs called hypogea continued to be built. Andreas Schmidt-Colinet *et al.*, *Das Tempelgrab Nr. 36 in Palmyra. Studien zur palmyrenischen Grabarchitektur und ihrer Ausstattung* (Mainz: Philipp von Zabern, 2nd ed. 1992), 41, emphasise the “ostentatious Romanism” of the particularly grand Temple Tomb no. 36. On the changes in style Michael Sommer, *Roms orientalische Steppengrenze. Palmyra – Edessa – Dura-Europos – Hatra. Eine Kulturgeschichte von Pompeius bis Diocletian*. Oriens et Occidens. Vol. 9 (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 2005), 9, 196–97.
- 47 Above, p. 120–23.
- 48 Above, p. 32.
- 49 On the patterns of distribution in Roman cities Neville Morley, “The early Roman empire. Distribution,” in *The Cambridge Economic History of the Greco-Roman world*, ed. Walter Scheidel, Ian Morris and Richard Saller (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 578–79.
- 50 Above, p. 34–7.
- 51 The geographical factors unfavourable to Palmyra have been stressed by Gary K. Young, *Rome’s Eastern Trade. International Commerce and Imperial Policy. 31 BC–AD 305*. (London: Routledge, 2001), 137.
- 52 *Ibid.*, 137–38.
- 53 Karl-Wilhelm Welwei, “Die griechische Polis. Entstehung, politische Organisationsform, historische Bedeutung,” in *Polis und Arché. Kleine Schriften zu Gesellschafts- und Herrschaftsstrukturen in der griechischen Welt*, ed. Karl-Wilhelm Welwei, Historia Einzelschriften (Stuttgart: Steiner, 2000), 94.
- 54 On this now in detail: Paola Mior, *The South-west Palmyrena in the Roman Period. Patterns of Land Exploitation and Territorial Management*. Diss. phil., Udine 2013/14, 107–47.
- 55 Jørgen Christian Meyer, “City and hinterland. Villages and estates north of Palmyra. New perspectives,” *Studia Palmyrenskie* 12 (2013): 274.
- 56 Above, p. 54–57.
- 57 Meyer, “City and hinterland,” 276.
- 58 Above, p. 68–73 (second and first centuries BC) and 115–23 (second century AD).
- 59 Above, p. 72 and 92.
- 60 PAT 1062. Cf. Monika Schuol, *Die Charakene. Ein mesopotamisches Königreich in hellenistisch-parthischer Zeit* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 2000), 383.
- 61 Above, p. 123–29. Also Sommer, *Roms orientalische Steppengrenze*, 9, 58–66, and now Eivind Heldaas Seland, *Ships of the Desert and Ships of the Sea. Palmyra in the World Trade of the First Three Centuries CE*. Philippika. Vol. 101 (Wiesbaden, 2016) *Ships of the Desert*, 35–38.

- 62 PAT 2754. Cf. Leonardo Gregoratti, “The Palmyrenes and the Arsacid policy,” *Voprosy Epigrafiki. Sbornik statei* 4 (2010): 25–27; Schuol, *Die Charakene*, 47–48.
- 63 Here, the existence of tombs suggests that Palmyrenes were present permanently. Cf. Schuol, *Die Charakene*, 383–84; Gregoratti, “The Palmyrenes and the Arsacid policy,” 34.
- 64 PAT 1375. Cf. “The Palmyrenes and the Arsacid policy,” 32–34; Schuol, *Die Charakene*, 56–57.
- 65 The commercial diaspora of the Palmyrenes was not limited to the Parthian Empire and the Persian Gulf. Rather, Palmyrenes operated along the alternative route via the Red Sea, as inscriptions from Dendera and Koptos as well as the inscriptions and one graffito from Berenike show. Cf. Matthew Adam Cobb, “The chronology of Roman trade in the Indian Ocean from Augustus to early third century CE,” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 58 (2015): 371–72; Kasper Evers, *Worlds Apart Trading Together. The Organisation of Long-Distance Trade between the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean. 1st–6th centuries CE*. Diss. phil. København: Københavns Universitet, Det Humanistiske Fakultet, 2016, 168. A number of Greek and Palmyrene graffiti have been discovered in a cave on the island of Socotra in the Gulf of Aden (ibid., 181). In Berenike, besides Palmyrene archers, civilians, among them women, are attested (ibid., 168).
- 66 Fernand Braudel, *La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen à l'époque de Philippe II* (Paris: A. Colin, 1949), vol. 1, 90–92.
- 67 Seland, *Ships of the Desert*, 101, 59.
- 68 Ibid., 51. An alternative route reaching the Euphrates above Hīt near the island of 'Āna, is discussed by Michał Gawlikowski, “Palmyre et l'Euphrate,” *Syria* 60 (1983) and now “Trade across frontiers. Foreign relations of a caravan city,” in *Palmyrena. City, Hinterland and Caravan* ed. Meyer, Seland and Anfinset (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2016), 21.
- 69 On the monsoon and its yearly rhythms above, p. 46.
- 70 P. Vindob. G 40822. Cf. Lionel Casson, “P. Vindob. G. 40822 and the shipping of goods from India,” *Bulletin of the American Society of Papyrologists* 23 (1986); Federico Morelli, “Dal Mar Rosso ad Alessandria. Il verso (ma anche il recto) del ‘papiro di Muziris’ (SB XVIII 13167)” *Tyche* 26 (2011): 97–105; Dorothea Rohde and Michael Sommer. *Geschichte in Quellen. Wirtschaft* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2016), 72–74.
- 71 Seland, *Ships of the Desert*, 101, 40.
- 72 PAT 1403 (AD 157); PAT 1400 (middle of the second century AD).
- 73 The wording ἀπὸ Σκυθίας can here only mean the north-west of India. Cf. Schuol, *Die Charakene*, 74.
- 74 AE 1912, 55. Above, p. 125. Cf. also Seland, *Ships of the Desert*, 101, 71.
- 75 Hanseatic League: Ulf Christian Ewert and Stephan Selzer, “Social networks,” in *A Companion to the Hanseatic League*, ed. Donald J. Harreld (Leiden: Brill, 2015). Phoenicians: above, p. 34–7.
- 76 Seland, *Ships of the Desert*, 101, 60–61 notes that many of the caravan inscriptions were indeed put up in spring.
- 77 Ibid., 60.
- 78 Eivind Heldaas Seland, “The Persian Gulf or the Red Sea? Two axes in ancient Indian Ocean trade, where to go and why,” *World Archaeology* 43 (2011): 404–06.
- 79 Evers, *Worlds Apart*, 197–98.
- 80 Peripl. mar. Erythr., 48.
- 81 Ibid., 35.
- 82 Ibid., 49. Cf. Marta Żuchowska, “Palmyra and the far eastern trade,” *Studia Palmyreńskie* 12 (2013): 383.
- 83 Andreas Schmidt-Colinet and Ḥālid al-As'ad, “Zur Urbanistik des hellenistischen Palmyra. Ein Vorbericht,” *Damaszener Mitteilungen* 12 (2000): 53.

- 84 Żuchowska, “Palmyra and the far eastern trade,” 383–84.
- 85 Michał Gawlikowski, “Trade across frontiers. Foreign relations of a caravan city,” in *Palmyrena. City, Hinterland and Caravan Trade* ed. Meyer, Seland and Anfinset, 24–25.
- 86 Paola Mior, “The road from Palmyra to Damascus in the *Tabula Peutingeriana*,” in *Palmyrena. City, Hinterland and Caravan Trade* ed. Meyer, Seland and Anfinset.
- 87 Seland, “Persian Gulf,” 404.
- 88 Mogens Herman Hansen, “Introduction. The concept of city-state and city-state culture,” in *A Comparative study of Thirty City-State Cultures. An Investigation Conducted by the Copenhagen Polis Centre*, ed. Mogens Herman Hansen, Det Kongelige Danske Videnskabernes Selskab. Historisk-filosofiske Skrifter (København: C. A. Reitzels forlag, 2000), 19.
- 89 Below, p. 199–203.
- 90 But only from the Severan period onwards. The first honorific decree which was put up in the name of the *dēmos* und *boulē*, is the inscription for Aelius Bora’ (PAT 1063, AD 198).
- 91 Above, p. 121–22.
- 92 Christian Meier, *Res publica amissa. Eine Studie zu Verfassung und Geschichte der späten römischen Republik* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner, 1966), 162–200.
- 93 Sommer, *Römische Geschichte*, 147–73.
- 94 Above, p. 120.
- 95 PAT 1400.
- 96 PAT 0197; 0282; 0288; 0294; 1378; 1397.
- 97 PAT 0197; 1378.
- 98 PAT 0262; 0274; 1399; 1411.
- 99 AE 1937,12; Inv. 10 77; PAT 0262; 0274; 0279; 0295; 0306; 0309; 1366; 1373; 1374; 1376; 1403; 1409; 1412; 1414; 1419; 2754 (very fragmentary).
- 100 PAT 0263; 1062.
- 101 Ibid.
- 102 PAT 0263.
- 103 PAT 1062.
- 104 For an overview, Eckhard Stephan, *Honoratioren, Griechen, Polisbürger. Kollektive Identitäten innerhalb der Oberschicht des kaiserzeitlichen Kleinasien* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2002).
- 105 Fundamental Paul Veyne, *Le pain et le cirque. Sociologie historique d’un pluralisme politique* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1976), 231–80.
- 106 On the forms of capital and their convertibility Pierre Bourdieu, *Propos sur le champ politique* (Lyon: Presses universitaires de Lyon, 2000).
- 107 PAT 0306, above, p. 117–18.
- 108 On this and the following Michael Sommer, “The Venice of the Sands. Palmyrene trade revisited,” in *Palmyrena. City, Hinterland and Caravan Trade*, ed. Meyer, Seland and Anfinset (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2016).
- 109 PAT 0270 (Seleukeia); PAT 1352 (Babylon); PAT 1374; 1397; 1584 (all Spasinou Charax).
- 110 Ernest Will, “Marchands et chefs de caravanes à Palmyre” *Syria* 34 (1957).
- 111 Ibid., 273: “des cheikhs selon le terme Arabe.” Contra, for different reasons: Yon, *Les notables de Palmyre*, 99, who sees in the addressees an “aristocratie marchande”; and Young, *Rome’s Eastern Trade*, 123–68, for whom Will’s distinction between “protecteurs” and “marchands” is an insubstantial construction.
- 112 PAT 1411 (“leader” of the caravan); PAT 1400 (customs formalities).
- 113 There is only one inscription (PAT 1397) awarding honours to a Roman centurion. However, the reason is not given.
- 114 First Michail Rostovtzeff, *Caravan Cities* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1932), 11. Later also Hugh Elton, *Frontiers of the Roman Empire* (London: B. T. Batsford, 1996), 93–94;

- Udo Hartmann, *Das palmyrenische Teilreich*. Oriens et Occidens. Vol. 2 (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 2001), 54–56; “What is it like to be a Palmyrene in the age of crisis? Changing Palmyrene identities in the third century AD,” in *The World of Palmyra*, ed. Andreas Kropp and Rubina Raja (København: Det Kongelige Danske Videnskabernes Selskab, 2016), 55; A. H. M. Jones, *The Cities of the Eastern Roman Provinces*. 2nd ed (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 266; Jean Starcky and Michał Gawlikowski, *Palmyre*. 2nd ed. (Paris: Librairie d’Amérique et d’Orient: Jean Maisonneuve, 1985); Will, *Palmyréniens*, 52–55. Sceptical, however, Gawlikowski, “Palmyre et l’Euphrate”; Ernest Will, “Marchands,” 266–68. The implicit model for the “desert police” was obviously the dromedary cavalry of the *Compagnies Méharistes* recruited by the French, from indigenous tribesmen, in their Saharan colonies.
- 115 This assumption has had a long history, beginning with Daniel Schlumberger, “Les quatre tribus de Palmyre,” *Syria* 48 (1971). Most recently: Lucinda Dirven, *The Palmyrenes of Dura-Europos. A Study of Religious Interaction in Roman Syria* (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 25–26; Yon, *Les notables de Palmyre*, 66–69. Andrew M. Smith, however, is critical of this notion, *Roman Palmyra. Identity, Community, and State Formation* (New York: Clarendon Press, 2013), 132–43.
- 116 PAT 2769 (αἱ δὲ τ[ῆ]ς π[ό]λε[ω]ς τέσσερα φυλαί).
- 117 Cf. the overview in: Yon, *Les notables de Palmyre*, 253.
- 118 Above, p. 22–4.
- 119 Hugh Kennedy, *The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphates. The Islamic Near East from the Sixth to the Eleventh Century* (London: Longman, 1986), 21.
- 120 Above, p. 174, Figure 8.3.
- 121 Ted Kaizer, “Man and god at Palmyra: Sacrifice, Lectisternia and Banquets,” *Religions in the Graeco-Roman World* 164 (2008): 187–88; *Religious Life*, 213–34.
- 122 Though the only Palmyrene inscription from the group of these honorific decrees does not translate the Greek term *syntechnia* (which has obviously been used synonymously with *symposia*) *marzh*’, but with *tg̃m*’, which itself is derived from the Greek word *tegma*.
- 123 Andreas Schmidt-Colinet et al., *Das Tempelgrab*, 40–41.

9 Palmyra after the Palmyrenes

Palmyra's capture by Aurelian in AD 272 marks the city's end as a political and economic factor in the East of the Roman world. The swift implosion of the badly documented rebellion in the following year proves how illusory its plan of restoring the city's old glory was. Palmyra's key role as the gateway of the eastern trade was a thing of the past; gone was also its political influence. The *raison d'être* of the tribal confederacy integrating sedentary and non-sedentary groups in the Palmyrene had been shared interest in the long-distance trade, its hinges being the tribal elites, who had bound city and steppe together. Trade and elites were now history: Palmyra was a city on the edge of the Empire, in the midst of a crisis-ridden region, which was repeatedly shaken by wars and, with the spread of Christianity, also by religious strife. For the oasis, a new chapter in its history had begun, wide of the stage of big politics.

Under the sign of the cross: from Rome to Constantinople

Having defeated Zenobia, the emperor Aurelian was able to celebrate yet another great victory. In early AD 274, he overpowered Tetricus, the last emperor of the "Gallic" Empire established by Postumus in AD 260.¹ A little later, he himself met his fate. While he was in Thrace to make preparations for a new Persian war, the *restitutor orbis* was stabbed from behind. In the third century, even successful rulers could perish in such a trivial way. Aurelian's successors Tacitus, Probus and Carus are good enough to appear in the footnotes of history books at best, in AD 284, however, a man seized power, who was to leave deep marks on the Roman world of late antiquity.

Diocles came from Dalmatia, and was a career soldier. On becoming emperor, he called himself Diocletian. In AD 285, he proclaimed his fellow officer Maximian Caesar; a few months later Maximian was promoted to the rank of Augustus. As such, Maximian had the same status as Diocletian. In an unprecedented move, Diocletian shared his power as emperor with a man who was not even related to him. In AD 293, each of the two Augusti appointed a Caesar, thus expanding the imperial college to four. The Tetrarchy was born, dictated by the problem that Rome's Empire had become too great for just one emperor. In addition, the new system integrated potential rivals into the syndicate of power, precluding future

usurpations from the outset. Diocletian even went a step further, declaring his resignation on 1 May AD 305, together with Maximian. The Augusti gave way for the Caesares Constantius and Galerius, who, as new Augusti, each appointed a new Caesar. However, the ingenious model of a divided, term-limited monarchy did not last long: personal loyalties and dynastic charisma were too deeply rooted in Rome's political DNA.

The Tetrarchs took on the long-procrastinated conflict with the Persians. Aurelian and Carus had been optimistic that they could benefit from the weakness of the Sasanian Empire, still afflicted with the effects of Shapur's ambitious, but ultimately failed, plan of conquest. While Aurelian's project of a Persian war had been thwarted by his own death, Carus succeeded in surprising the Sasanians, and even captured their capital, Ktesiphon. However, when the campaign had come to a standstill in AD 283, he was probably murdered by officers of his own entourage. In AD 296, the Persian king Narseh, contrary to what had been agreed with the Romans, intervened in Armenia despite his kingdom having just recovered from a civil war between himself and his brother Bahram. The Roman reaction was prompt: Diocletian dispatched the Caesar of the East, Galerius, to Mesopotamia. But near Kallinikon on the Euphrates, the Romans suffered an unexpected defeat against Narseh. Late Roman sources relate that Diocletian was by no means amused, letting his Caesar walk by the side of his coach for quite a stretch of the road.² The humiliation reminded the younger man who really was in charge in the Tetrarchy. After being reinforced with gothic *auxilia*, Galerius led his army once again across the Euphrates and defeated Narseh at Satala in Armenia Minor, present-day's eastern Turkey. The tale goes that Narseh narrowly managed to escape, leaving, however, his harem and treasury behind.³

After the victory, Rome was able to dictate the conditions of peace to the Persians. The ambassadors conferred in Nisibis and ruled that any trade between the two empires should take place, from then on, via the Mesopotamian city. In a certain sense, Nisibis assumed therewith Palmyra's former role, the conditions for the exchange of goods, however, having dramatically changed. The eastern trade now became a business to be viewed as a potential threat to imperial security by increasingly suspicious emperors and their officials. The autonomous position which Palmyra had once maintained in the face of the Roman Empire was no option for Nisibis. For the decision to channel trade via Nisibis, fiscal reasons may have been the decisive factor. The new bottleneck made it easier for the Roman government to tax the goods traded via the Mesopotamian route and to secure its share of profits. Apart from the Nisibis clause, the treaty stipulated territorial concessions to be made by the Persians. Various territories across the Tigris were separated from the Persian Empire and attached to the Roman province of Mesopotamia; Armenia and the small Caucasian kingdom of Iberia changed from Persian to Roman suzerainty.⁴

Far more directly than by the war and its aftermath, Palmyra was affected by a gigantic infrastructure project of the Tetrarchs, which served to protect the densely-populated west and north of the Syrian provinces against two threats: the Persians and the nomads, who, in the third century AD, were about to become

a new power factor in the region. The wars of the third century had dramatically altered the political geography of the steppe frontier, destroying Hatra and the fortifications clustered around Dura-Europos along the Euphrates. Palmyra existed still, but was reduced to insignificance. Gone were the cities which had previously served as the urban cores of polymorphic societies. The mobile segments of these societies became disengaged, accelerating in this way a development that had probably been going on for a long time: the infiltration of new ethnic groups and a large-scale reconfiguration of existing tribal identities. In the long run, this resulted in a cluster of rivalling tribal confederacies, whose members spoke various Arabic idioms. The ethnicity of these groups can only be gathered from the writings of much later Arabic and Persian authors of the Islamic period, such as the Persian historian at-Tabarī, who wrote around AD 900. Such texts are obviously rooted in the period of their creation, and can only be read as pieces of intentional history. They were crafted to fill the void of the Arab peoples' early history and should be treated with due caution.⁵

Having said that, this much seems to be clear: the city of al-Hīra in western Babylonia, being located in the midst of fertile fields and serving as a hub of the long-distance trade, became the residence of a possibly Arab-speaking dynasty, the Naṣrids. Al-Hīra became the focal point of a probably loosely-knit tribal confederacy, the Banū Laḥm or Laḥmids, whose zone of influence included Syria, Mesopotamia and the north of the Arabian Peninsula. Perhaps somewhat later, a second group appeared in the border area between the provinces of Syria and Arabia, the Salīh, who were to be replaced by the Jaffnids (or Ghassanids), another tribal confederacy, from the fifth century AD onwards. A look at the geography of the region reveals the problem for the Romans, as well as for the Sasanians: the migratory range of a large group such as the Laḥmids included spaces claimed by Rome, territories under Sasanian rule and areas not controlled by any of the great powers.⁶

The security risks posed by the nomads were certainly recognized in Rome. The Tetrarchs responded by promptly setting up a strongly fortified defensive line, the *Strata Diocletiana*. It can still be traced from Sura on the Euphrates to the legionary camp of Bethesion, east of the Dead Sea, but it probably ran as far as to the Gulf of Aqaba. The *Strata Diocletiana* was much more than a road: it was a defensive system with legionary camps, milecastles, fortified villages (*vici*), a water supply system and a network of traffic routes which gave the defending forces the advantage of controlling the interior lines. In part, it complemented older military defence systems such as the *Via nova Traiana* from Aqaba to Bostra, replacing and upgrading fortifications which had fallen into disrepair or had been damaged during the wars of the third century AD.⁷

The supporting pillar of the new defence system was Palmyra, which was strongly fortified under the Tetrarchs and their immediate successors in the fourth century AD. In the west of the old city, a colossal Roman military camp was built next to the Transverse Colonnade. Maintaining this garrison suddenly became Palmyra's reason for existence as a city. Thanks to a building inscription, the establishment of the camp can be dated to the time of the first Tetrarchy (AD 293–305). In this inscription, the governor of Syria Phoenice, Sossianus Hierocles, is named

as the official responsible for the construction works.⁸ The Tetrarchic buildings presumably replaced an older military camp, in all likelihood constructed under Aurelian.⁹ The entire complex is of a splendour rarely seen in other military camps built in the same period, for instance those on the Rhine. The headquarters were particularly impressive. Visitors entering the building had to climb a large flight of steps and then face the standards' shrine where the legion's aquilas and the statues of the imperial families were positioned.

Many parts of the camp, including the columns carrying the portico of the headquarters, had been removed from Palmyra's older buildings. The columns lining the *via praetoria*, the camp's main road that ran towards the headquarters, were taken from buildings of the city, which had been demolished for the construction of the camp. The practice of cannibalizing existing structures for new buildings was by no means confined to Palmyra. It was widespread across the ancient world. In Tetrarchic Palmyra, however, there was a remarkable lack of respect for the cityscape, which had grown over centuries. It was treated like a quarry. Existing buildings were dismantled and building material reused for the military infrastructure. Gems such as the sarcophagus of the unknown third-century tomb owner were recklessly used for the hastily erected city wall (see Figures 8.4a and b). Even entire tombs were included in the city wall, a sign that their founders – Palmyra's established elite – no longer had control over what was happening in their city.

The city changed its face not simply because the camp was built and existing architecture gutted. Parts of the city were functionally reconfigured in such a way that they met the needs of the Roman military. The large building opposite the theatre, on the northern side of the main colonnade, was transformed into a huge bathing compound. Spoliae from existing buildings were also used for this structure.¹⁰ There has been speculation that the compound had previously served as Zenobia's "palace"; but this is purely conjectural and probably ill-founded.¹¹ There is no doubt, however, that the large structure which was conspicuously placed at the central section of the colonnade and rather prominent in the cityscape, had played an important role in Palmyra before Aurelian.

Back into the camp: when walking along *via praetoria* one passed long rows of elongated buildings where the soldiers had their lodgings. At the centre of the camp, the main road intersects with a second axis, the *via principalis*. At the intersection, there was a four-columned monument, which was very similar to the Tetrapylon at the centre of Palmyra's main colonnade. Fieldwork has shown that spoliae were also used for this structure, the *groma*. They include the fragment of an altar consecrated in AD 239/240.¹² Turning north here, one reached a sanctuary which contrasted, because of its architecture, with the surrounding camp. The temple is a prostyle with temenos, built by a certain Taimaršu in the second half of the second century AD.¹³ It had replaced an older sanctuary dating back to the first century BC, which had then been far from the city's inhabited area. The temenos was altered by the construction of the Camp of Diocletian, but the sanctuary remained intact and was still in use for another hundred years until Theodosius closed the polytheistic temples towards the end of the fourth century AD.

From what we know, it took a long while until, following Constantine's conversion, Christianity gained the upper hand in Palmyra.¹⁴ This is largely in tune with findings from other parts of the eastern provinces. The earliest indications for the presence of Christians come from a cemetery in the northern, Hippodamic, quarter of the city. Here, among other things, archaeologists found a glass cup, several crosses of metal, and a small reliquary. This evidence dates certainly from the time after Aurelian's conquest of Palmyra, presumably from the fourth, perhaps even from the fifth century. In the fifth century, Christian names gradually spread and replaced the previously common theophoric names.¹⁵ In public space, however, Christianity remained invisible until the early sixth century, when the Temples of Bēl and of Ba'al-Šamen were converted into churches, although new churches were built as well, all in the northern quarter.¹⁶ The Temple of Bēl's axis was turned, so that the cella faced to the east, where a canopy took the place of the missing apse. In addition, the building was decorated with wall paintings on Christian themes. When the Temple of Ba'al-Šamen was converted to a church, structural transformations of a minor scale were carried out. In the sixth century, another church was created by converting a hall building just north of the colonnaded street (the so-called Church I). New constructions were three basilicas (Churches II–IV) built along the so-called Church Street in the Hippodamic quarter. They are of an even later date than the other Christian buildings at Palmyra, partly going back to the Islamic period.

Rumours about Christians wielding influence on Palmyra's politics are of quite early date. Paul of Samosata, the former bishop of Antioch, who was deposed in AD 268 because of heresy, was accused under Aurelian of having served as advisor to Zenobia.¹⁷ Was the connection between Paul and Zenobia the beginning of a sundering, which let Syria drift steadily away from Constantinople's orthodoxy? Indeed, later on, from the fifth century, there was increasing political and religious tension between the capital Constantinople and the Empire's Syrian periphery. The idea, however, that the specific development of Syrian Christianity, which finally resulted in Monophysitism, was sown by Paul of Samosata, and that Zenobia followed Christian advice, appears quite far-fetched. There is also the anonymous hagiography of Alexander Acoimetes, who in the fourth century, had converted a band of robbers to Christianity and been wandering through Syria with this strange escort. Allegedly, Alexander had not been admitted to Palmyra, which is called the "city of Solomon" by the hagiography, referring to the Bible's Second Book of Chronicles, according to which Solomon built "Tadmor in the wilderness."¹⁸ The hagiography concludes that the Palmyrenes closed the gates before Alexander could enter their city because "they are Jews."¹⁹ By the time of Constantine, that much is clear, Palmyra was the see of a Christian bishop. In AD 325, the bishop represented his city at the First Council of Nicaea, during which the Nicene Creed prevailed against the teachings of Arius. In AD 335 he participated in the Synod of Tyre, and in AD 451 in the Council of Chalcedon, where Nestorianism and Monophysitism were rejected.

By this time, the Roman Empire had been divided in two parts. The West, hit by the full force of the migration of peoples, gradually gave way to barbarian

kingdoms. The economically and politically much stronger East overcame the crisis and continued the tradition of Rome on a shrinking, but still substantial, territory. The sense of continuity persisted in the Byzantine Empire, as we now call it, until 1453. The Byzantines called themselves *Rhomaioi*, Romans. Palmyra shared the fate of the Eastern Empire, until Syria's conquest by the Muslim Arabs. The garrison, though reduced in size, remained in the city until the first decades of the seventh century. Emperor Justinian I (527–565), whose policy aimed at the complete restoration of the Roman Empire in the West, is said not only to have rebuilt churches in Palmyra, but to have completely modernized the water supply and the defence systems.²⁰

There was a lot of defensive work to do in Palmyra. The era of Persian–Roman détente, which had begun in AD 363 with the loss of the Persian war initiated by emperor Julian, was suddenly over in 502. The period of peaceful coexistence had lasted throughout the fifth century while both empires had been critically affected by the migration of the Huns, the Goths and other ethnic groups. In 502, the Persian king Kavadh I (499–531) attacked the Roman part of Armenia, thus provoking a war which did not give lasting success to any of the participants, but reopened the race for a better strategic position in Armenia and the Caucasus. From 526 to 532, from 540 to 545, and from 548 to 557, more wars shook the Near East. In most cases, the epicentre of the fighting was in Armenia and the Caucasus, but the Persian king Khosrow I succeeded in capturing nearly all of Syria, including Antioch, and even large parts of Asia Minor. The first hostile conquest of the eastern metropolis since Shapur I had sacked the city in AD 252 sent shock waves throughout the Empire. Other cities, including Bostra, which, like Palmyra, was situated on the *strata Diocletiana*, fell victim to the Persians. In Apameia, Khosrow held court and organized gladiatorial games in an attempt to mimic the Roman emperors.²¹ It is possible that the Roman fortification system in Syria and Arabia was severely affected by the crisis around 540, or that it even ceased to exist. While the country was devastated by warfare, the bubonic plague raged in Syria, killing countless people.²²

How Palmyra mastered the crisis is unknown, due to lack of evidence. It is hard to believe that Khosrow spared the fortified garrison town when he attacked the *strata Diocletiana*. Who, if anyone, defended Palmyra in this troubled century? Was it still the East-Roman military? Was it the Jafnids, who had settled in the Syro-Arab frontier zone and whose dynasty resided in Bostra, being Constantinople's military sub-contractors, ensuring the region's safety and its frontier protection? We do not know.

The peace signed by Justinian and Khosrow in 562, gave the region a much-needed breathing space. The treaty was arranged for a period of fifty years, on the basis of the status quo ante. For Rome, it came with a hefty price tag: 30,000 solidi were to be paid annually – the equivalent of 500 pounds of gold. Before long, the next war broke out, the first in a series of endlessly long and ardent conflicts (from 572 to 591 and from 603 to 629), which brought devastation, nameless suffering and thousands of deaths over the region. The wars between the empires of East Rome and Persia became entangled with the religious and tribal

conflicts of the Near East. Christians in Persia were regarded as Constantinople's fifth column, the Arab tribal confederacies were involved in tough proxy warfare. The complete collapse of one or other of the two Empires seemed imminent more than once, such as in 626, when an Avar and Slav army siding with the Persians besieged Constantinople. The consequences of these conflicts along with other catastrophes – the bubonic plague in 541 and several disastrous earthquakes – were devastating: the high death toll led to demographic decline and shrinking armies, but also paralyzed urban life and axed the region's economic potential. Where remnants of local self-government had still been in place – in Antioch and the other great cities of northern Syria – they gave way to impotence and resignation. The balance between town and countryside shifted dramatically. Cities were deprived of their dominant role. Along with this, the Greek language lost its century-long hegemony over local idioms. Syriac became the standard language used for literature and liturgical purposes. Greek toponyms disappeared, being replaced by Semitic ones, which resurfaced for the first time since Alexander the Great: Ḥalab instead of Beroia, Dara instead of Anastasiopolis, ar-Rastan instead of Arethusa. Monophysitism, which was rooted primarily in the countryside, became dominant in Syria, separating the Levant from Constantinople. The gap could not even be bridged by the emperors, who offered compromises – too poisoned was the religious climate by the late sixth century.

Finally, the sixth century brought the decline of an industry which had dominated the region for centuries and to which Palmyra had also owed its wealth: the intercontinental long-distance trade, which had benefitted from a reliable degree of security along the routes through Mesopotamia and the Arabian Peninsula, and from the insatiable market the Roman Empire had been. Around the middle of the sixth century, none of these requirements was met: the large number of conflicts had made many trade routes impassable. The former western Empire had collapsed as a market for imported luxury goods as a result of the migration of peoples and of Justinian's brutal reconquest. The eastern Empire still existed, but it was economically weakened due to the permanent overstrain of its resources. The world of late antique Syria had already radically changed long before the Muslim Arabs appeared on the stage.²³

Under the crescent: from Constantinople to Damascus

In 627, the Roman Emperor Herakleios won a decisive victory over the Persians led by general Rhazates, near the ruins of Nineveh. Two years later, Constantinople and the Persians concluded a peace treaty for the last time. Finally, stability seemed within reach for a region which needed it most desperately. Yet it was the silence before the storm. In the decades of conflict, the area between the Mediterranean and Iran had been transformed into a power vacuum waiting to be filled. Worse off than Herakleios' tormented Empire was the Persian Empire of the Sasanians. When peace was concluded, this former powerful state was already engulfed in the chaos of civil war, with several rivalling pretenders fighting each other, though

none of them lasting for more than a few months on the throne. The Empire, which had always been a patchwork of different ethnicities and religions, could scarcely be kept together by such mock kings.²⁴

In 630, Muhammad conquered Mecca, and the expansion of the Muslim Arabs started. Within a few years, it transformed the political situation in the Middle East from the ground up. None of the events preceding Muhammad's rise had been noticed in Constantinople or Ktesiphon. The Arabian Peninsula had been in a state of turmoil for some time, partly because the profitable long-distance trade between Arabia Felix and Byzantium, from which some of the tribes had hugely benefitted, had come to a standstill. In 632, Muhammad died. A period of unprecedented expansion began with his successors, Abū Bakr (632–634), and 'Umar ibn al-Ḥattāb (634–644), the first and second caliphs. It first affected the regions adjacent to the Arabian Peninsula, to the north (the Levant) and west (Egypt). Following the death of Muhammad, Abū Bakr succeeded in suppressing a revolt of Arab tribes in the so-called Ridda wars. As a result, the entire Arabian Peninsula became politically united in a Pax Islamica of sorts. The new situation set free forces which were directly diverted to the outside by the caliphs. They had no choice, for the periodic attacks on rival tribes, *ḡazw* in Arabic, which were at the heart of the tribal society's political identity, had become impossible under the auspices of the Pax Islamica. To compensate, a substantial number of Arab warriors enlisted in the army of the caliphs, which was not organized according to tribes, but as the army of the Umma, the community of the faithful.

For the caliphs, it was a political necessity to unite all Arabs under their leadership, hence under the crescent of Islam. This, of course, included the tribes living in the Fertile Crescent, such as the Laḥmids, who inhabited southern Mesopotamia around al-Ḥīra, and the Jafnids in Syria. The conquest did not take the form of a great trek in the style of the migration of peoples, but was a military enterprise carried out in a meticulously planned manner. The caliph's warriors did not come with bag and baggage, with kith and kin, but as soldiers organized in regular units and under the command of trained officers. Ḥālīd ibn al-Walīd, Abū Bakr's commander-in-chief, first turned against the Sasanian Empire, which was in any case in mortal agony. Then, at the behest of Abū Bakr, he marched into Syria, either via the oasis of Dūmat al-Jandal in the north of the Arabian Peninsula, or via Palmyra. When he was about to launch the offensive, Abū Bakr died, and his successor 'Umar ibn al-Ḥattāb replaced Ḥālīd with Abū 'Ubaida. The new commander-in-chief defeated the Byzantines in three successive battles, the most important of which was the battle on the Yarmūk river near Damascus. In addition to the Byzantine nucleus of his army, the emperor Herakleios had also summoned the allied Arab tribes of the Fertile Crescent. His army was thus probably stronger than the one the Muslims led into battle, his cause was, however, lost nonetheless. Damascus, and a little later Antioch, fell into the hands of the Muslims. Byzantium as the eastern successor state of the Roman Empire was reduced to the Balkans and Asia Minor, since northern Mesopotamia with Kallinikon and Edessa, as well as Egypt, the Empire's breadbasket, were lost to the Arabs in 639

and 640/42 respectively. In 642, the Arabs also won the decisive battle against Yazdegerd III, the last Sasanian, who still held his ground in the extreme north-east of his Empire for a few years, but then fell victim to murder.

What had once been the Romano-Persian Near East was now completely in the hands of the Muslims. Syria was the periphery of an empire dominated by the Arabian Peninsula, whose expansion had the character of a conquest, rather than of a colonization with successive land appropriation. Those who had not fled retained their possessions and now paid tax to the caliph instead of the emperor in Constantinople. Mu'āwiya bin Abī Sufyān, who originated from the ancient elite of Mecca, became the governor, *amīr*, of Syria. He rigorously organized the immigration from the peninsula, settling ethnic Arabs along the coast and the military border towards Byzantium, as well as around the middle Euphrates, in order to protect such vital regions for the caliphs. He painstakingly saw to it that this settlement activity was limited to previously uninhabited land, in order to avoid conflicts with the local population.²⁵ The Arabs who had migrated from the peninsula, at first integrated swiftly into the local community, mainly because the linguistic and ethnic thresholds were not very high. The position of the *amīr* was hereditary, the officeholder basically had *carte blanche* in all local affairs. In 660, Mu'āwiya was proclaimed caliph in the capital of Damascus in a classical act of usurpation. At this time, the young Islamic empire had entered its first serious crisis: uprisings, civil war and a rapid decline in the authority of the fourth and last in the line of Rashidun caliphs related to Muhammad, Alī bin Abī Tālīb, called into question the caliphate's very existence.

In 661, Alī was murdered, and now there was no way of avoiding Mu'āwiya. As *amīr* of Syria, he had created a strong domestic power. He also controlled the Syrian army, the strongest force within the Arab army, was a clever political tactician and well-connected in the caliphate's upper crust. There was reason to hope that he could lead the young Muslim empire out of the crisis. Mu'āwiya became the founder of a dynasty: his family, the Umayyads, held the throne of the caliphs until 750. The price the Muslim world had to pay was, unsurprisingly, high: the supporters of Alī refused to recognize the dynasty established by Mu'āwiya. The split between Mu'āwiya's followers, the Sunnis, and his opponents, the Shiites, led Islam into its first schism, which has not yet been healed.

All historical accounts about the Umayyads originate from the period of their successors, the Abbasids, whose centre of government was Baghdad. Accordingly, they are to be treated with caution. The evidence for Syria is particularly scarce, although the Umayyad's capital was the Syrian city of Damascus. For the first time since the Seleucids, the Levant was the core, not the periphery, of a great empire. The new dynasty, however, sat by no means firmly in the saddle. The nature of the rifts which divided the caliphate's society became apparent after the death of caliph Yazid I in 683, when a counter-caliph was immediately proclaimed at Mecca. The Syrian tribes were likewise in disagreement: while the Qais, who settled in the north of Syria, along the Byzantine frontier, in northern Mesopotamia, and the neighbouring areas of Armenia, supported the rebels in Mecca, the southern tribes who were joined in the confederacy of the Yamanī,

remained loyal to the Umayyads. The Qais were mainly composed by tribes of the Arabian Peninsula, who had migrated after the conquest. The Yamanī, on the other hand, who were located in Transjordan, Palestine, in the region around Homs and in the Palmyrene, represented mostly tribes with a long history in the region, including many of Christian faith. In the end, the Umayyad 'Abd al-Malik (685–705) emerged victorious from the conflict. He stabilized the caliphate and initiated the second phase of Arab expansion, which finally culminated in the conquest of the Iberian Peninsula following the defeat of the Visigoths (711).

Damascus experienced an unprecedented boom under the Umayyad rule, but other regions did too.²⁶ The eastern and southern hinterland of Damascus, from the Beqaa Valley to the Syrian Desert, flourished once again. In the nine decades from 660 to 750, the trend towards demographic and economic decline, which had started in the final century of Byzantine rule, reversed. The rule of Mu'āwīya and his successors pushed members of the local elite, especially from southern Syria, into key positions within the caliphate. They invested their new wealth in splendid residences, the so-called Desert Castles (*quṣūr*), which soon dotted the arid regions of Syria and Transjordan. Infrastructural backbone for the desert belt's development into a region of prosperity were significant investments in cities, roads and especially water supply. There is a remarkable cultural continuity between the late Roman-Byzantine and the Umayyad periods. The city of Anjar, founded by the Umayyads in the Beqaa Valley at the beginning of the eighth century, with its grid-shaped plan of porticoed *cardo* and *decumanus* as its main axes and a Tetrapylon at their crossing, can hardly be distinguished from any late Roman city in the East.²⁷

Palmyra and the Palmyrene had also their share in the boom, as a thorough archaeological investigation of the region in the years before the Syrian civil war has revealed.²⁸ The city's expansion was mainly due to investment in new settlements and in the agricultural infrastructure of the Syrian Desert. Here, considerable efforts were made to gain new arable land for the settlers from the Arabian Peninsula in order to spare those areas which were already densely populated. One of these projects, the fortified settlement of Qaṣr al-Ḥeir al-Sharqī, was designed by the Damascus caliphs as an alternative residence, since their capital was notoriously haunted by epidemics. The fortress is located about 130 kilometres north-east of Palmyra, approximately halfway towards the Euphrates. The *Quaūr*, of which Qaṣr al-Ḥeir al-Sharqī was the largest and most glamorous example in the Palmyra region, undoubtedly served both representative and recreational purposes. What is more important, however, is that they were used by a landed aristocracy as centres of their *latifundia*. Paradoxically, during the post-Roman period, seen from a structural point of view, the Syrian steppe frontier began to look similar to the Latin West, where the *villa rustica* had exactly the same function. In all likelihood, the Umayyads made such an immense effort to fertilise and settle marginal areas like the Syrian Desert, because they needed them as sources of tax revenues. In the relatively loosely-knit caliphate, they could use for themselves only the income of their core territories of Syria and Palestine.²⁹

Palmyra itself seems to have assumed a pivotal function in this settlement system, as it was completely restructured by the Umayyad caliphs. The impressive building activity reveals the handwriting of the Damascus central government, but also of local initiative. Despite the new rulers being Muslims, churches continued to be built in Palmyra. At least Church II, but probably also Church III and the much larger Church IV, were erected in the Islamic period. However, in spite of all continuity, the changes were unmistakable. Presumably the profoundest transformation of Palmyra's urban landscape was caused by the complete abandonment of "public" space, which had previously claimed large parts of the city. The colonnaded street was turned into a *sūq*, other buildings, such as the theatre or the Agora, were built up with houses.³⁰ The only public meeting place was now the mosque, which in the Umayyad period was built inside the colossal building of the so-called Caesareum, next to the Tetracylon, and thus in the immediate geographical centre of the city: here people prayed, preached, debated and sat in court.

It is hardly by accident that the mosque broke with the religious tradition, which had continued from the settlement's earliest times all the way through to Christianity: that the epicentre of Palmyra's religious landscape was no longer located in the periphery, in the Temple of Bēl, but in the city's very heart. The industrious hands of the Umayyad architects and craftsmen had transformed the ancient city into an Arab medina, at the centre of which the mosque belonged.³¹ The same happened in other cities of the expanding Islamic world, both new and old. Palmyra forms part of a whole series of Syrian cities which were either created from scratch by the Umayyads (such as Damascus, Homs, Amman, Jerusalem, Aleppo and Bostra) or entered, after a long period of neglect, a phase of new prosperity and urban growth (Anjar and Qaṣr al-Ḥeir al-Sharqī). The economic foundation of all these cities was their function as markets for the supply of the aristocratic latifundia. Palmyra was no longer the hub where luxury goods arriving through the arteries of the intercontinental long-distance trade were exchanged. Its *sūq* rumbled instead with the noise of traders selling all kinds of regional produce.

However, this late prime of Syria's urban landscape was rather short-lived. In 750, the last Umayyad caliph lost his throne. The centre of the Islamic world shifted from the Levant to Mesopotamia, where the Abbasids established their new capital at Baghdad. Syria, and Palmyra with it, were once again periphery. The oasis of Tadmur was not completely abandoned. It continued to serve as a military post controlling the overland routes through Syria. In 1132/1133, an inscription records that the Emir of Damascus, Yusuf ibn Firuz, turned the Temple of Bēl into a fortress. A few decades later, the military infrastructure, which had perhaps suffered from a number of earthquakes in the twelfth century, received another overhaul. Around 1230, when the invasion of the Mongols reached its peak, a fortress was built on the hilltop overlooking the city. Centuries later, around 1600, it was fortified by the Druze Emir Faḥr ad-Dīn II to become the imposing citadel that still dominates the cityscape today. While the centuries passed, the oasis' population was in constant decline. The few remaining inhabitants

erected their modest dwellings in the giant courtyard of the former Temple of Bēl, whose cella was used as a mosque. After having been a real place with a history of its own for more than a millennium, Palmyra now became a place of the imaginary world. The city, its peak in the third century, and above all Zenobia, Aurelian's formidable enemy, all turned into a legend.

Legendary Palmyra

Palmyra's legend was told in different ways in the East and in the West. Zenobia has a pivotal role in both strands. This is hardly surprising: in ancient times already, Zenobia, the amazon queen, and her career from Odinat's widow to "Desert Queen" inspired the imagination of many authors. The basic framework of the story appeared in the fourth century. Several narratives contributed to its creation, the *Historia Augusta*, however, occupies a key position as the most detailed account. A lot of ink has been spilled about the reliability of this work believed to be "just as dangerous as it is indispensable" (Mommsen), but what matters here is not the *Historia Augusta*'s plausibility, but the impact it and its biography of Zenobia had on cultural history.³²

This relatively short biography is actually one of the longer ones in the book on the "Thirty Tyrants." It does not really deal with "tyrants" – who were, in the language of the period, bad emperors – but presents a rather a colourful florilegium of usurpers, dynasts, generals, obscure and completely fictitious characters, who all fit into the period of military anarchy from Severus Alexander to Diocletian. Title and number – in fact, there are 32 biographies – owe their origin to the author's keenness to show off his erudition. The original "thirty tyrants" were the oligarchs in Athens after the Peloponnesian War. The biographies, packed with scandal and bloodshed, carry little historical information, but they make for an entertaining read. This, we may suppose, was precisely the author's intention. Still, the Zenobia biography begins with a clear political statement: "Now all shame is exhausted, for in the weakened state of the commonwealth things came to such a pass that, while Gallienus conducted himself in the most evil fashion, even women ruled most excellently."³³ Zenobia is the prism, through which the miserable weakness of the ruler (Gallienus) and of the empire (Rome in the third century) become apparent. According to her biographer, despite being a foreigner and rather in the tradition of Cleopatra and Dido, Zenobia puts on the imperial purple and reigns in the name of her sons, and she does it longer than one might have expected from a woman. Zenobia survives Gallienus and Claudius as rulers, and is defeated in the end by Aurelian, but only "by the skin of his teeth." Then he has her brought to Rome as a prisoner.³⁴

The text pretends to quote from a speech given by Aurelian before the Senate, in which the emperor, in order to highlight his own accomplishment, praises Zenobia's wisdom, steadiness, courage, generosity and discipline.³⁵ Then the author points out, in his own words, what he thinks about Zenobia's behaviour as a wife and as a ruler. She lives in royal pomp and holds court in the manner of the Persian kings, but appears in popular assemblies like a Roman emperor: helmeted, with bare

arms and a robe with a purple hem and precious stones. Her face is dark, her eyes black, her teeth so bright, that many believe she has pearls in her mouth instead of teeth. She is dazzlingly beautiful, the biographer continues, but in her manners she resembles a man, driving chariots, passionately hunting and revelling till dawn with her officers. Her Latin leaves a lot to be desired, but her Egyptian (*Aegyptiace*) is fluent. She has excellent knowledge about the Near East's history and is accustomed to read Roman history in Greek.³⁶ The biography concludes with Zenobia's capture by Aurelian. Why did she resist the Roman emperors, Aurelian asks, and Zenobia replies that she respects only him, Aurelian, as emperor. Gallienus and Claudius have been unworthy of the office. Aurelian spares Zenobia's life, and she spends what remains of it as a Roman matron on an estate in the posh town of Tibur, in central Italy.³⁷

In the *Historia Augusta*'s biography of Aurelian, Zenobia has several appearances. Here, she is introduced as a woman who in the name of her sons, held an *imperium orientale*.³⁸ The narrative follows Aurelian all the way to the gates of Palmyra. While the city is put under siege, the emperor, one of his officers and Zenobia exchange letters, which disclose Zenobia's defiance, a trace of megalomania, but also a formidable courage. When Aurelian demands unconditional surrender, she replies with "more pride and insolence than befitted her fortunes." She refuses to surrender, claiming that she still has "Persians, Saracens, Armenians and Syrian robbers," as aces up her sleeve. "Like Cleopatra, she would rather die like a queen than stay alive."³⁹

Zenobia, the rebellious Queen of the Desert, fits well with the political situation in the East around 400, when the *Historia Augusta* was presumably written. During this period, ethnic groups had begun to establish themselves along the steppe frontier. While distancing themselves from the two empires, they politically pursued their own agenda, and were clearly perceived as alien by the Romans. From this perspective, the story can be read as a piece of intentional history explaining to its audience how Rome's Near Eastern steppe frontier could have been turned into the theatre of intense – and for Rome potentially hazardous – tribal warfare. In addition, the episode struck a chord with contemporaries because it was loaded with exotic stereotypes and sensation, precisely what the readers expected from entertaining historiography. Consequently, the narrative engraved itself quite successfully into the historical memory of late Rome and early Byzantium. Zosimos, for example, told the story in the early sixth century in a very similar form, although more prosaically. Yet his version comes to a different conclusion. Here, Zenobia tries to flee to Persia, but is captured and dies on the journey to Rome.⁴⁰

In the Arab and Persian Near East, the story of Zenobia was told quite differently. The historians at-Tabarī and Ibn Ḥaldūn, writing, respectively, around 800 and in the thirteenth century, wrote the story of queen al-Zabbā', daughter of 'Amr, the ruler of Tadmur and all the Arabs of northern Syria. 'Amr fights against his adversary Jadhīma al-Abrash, the leader of the Tanūḥ at al-Ḥīra, where he meets his death. His daughter al-Zabbā' succeeds him as ruler over Tadmur, seeking revenge at the earliest opportunity. Cunningly, she sends a messenger to

Jadhīma delivering an offer of marriage to the tribal leader. Jadhīma is careless enough to accept and runs into a deadly trap: the queen fills the unsuspecting Tanūh with wine, stabs him and has him bleed to death. An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth: Jadhīma's loyal friend Qaṣīr appears before al-Zabbā', pretending he has been running away from Jadhīma's nephew and successor. He declares himself to be willing to return to al-Ḥīra to retrieve his belongings from home. Twice he carries caravans laden with silk, ointments and jewels to Palmyra, but on the third occasion, the camels do not carry any precious items, but soldiers ready for battle. They massacre al-Zabbā''s guards, driving the queen into committing suicide by using poison.⁴¹

Like its western counterpart, the story contains many entertaining elements, here mainly of the sex-and-crime type. There is, however, a lot more to it. The narrative about al-Zabbā', who is, of course, a legendary reflection of Zenobia, and her opponents, the Tanūh, is, more than anything else, a legend explaining the origin of the tribal confederacies that had spread along the steppe frontier after Zenobia's defeat. In the first place, it is a charter myth for the city of al-Ḥīra.⁴² In the legend, historical facts – a woman ruling Palmyra, the importance of the city as a hub of long-distance trade – are mirrored, but they are enriched with material of completely different origin and condensed into a narrative which, like the western myth, is intentional history, in this case the history of the Arab tribes in the region of Syria-Mesopotamia, who are seeking explanations for centuries-old hostilities that had been handed down from generation to generation. The factor, which for any western audience is the decisive one in the events unfolding around Zenobia, is completely absent in the Arab tradition: Rome. Owing to its local character, the myth could only be significant to a world in which the tribal conflicts it features were a political reality. It still found its way into the canonized historical memory of the medieval Islamic world, but there it remained. For the modern period, it had no relevance whatsoever.

The Western interpretation of the events, as once devised by the *Historia Augusta*, has had a very different fate. It has been, and to this day continues to be, integrated into a wide range of grand narratives, discourses of morality and decadence, exotic orientalism, available to those in search of strong women in history, to Arab nationalists who are looking for a role model projected into the distant past – and to those who simply want to be entertained.⁴³

In the West, Giovanni Boccaccio was the first to discover the gripping tragedy of Zenobia's story. In 1374, his collection of Latin biographies of famous women (*De mulieribus claribus*) was published. With this work, Boccaccio intended to resume the great tradition of ancient literature. Livy, Ovid and, especially, Suetonius were his literary models. Not only in terms of style, but also of content, the Florentine writer was inspired by classical antiquity. Only few of the 106 women whom he deemed worthy of a biography were characters from the Bible, the overwhelming majority being taken from Greco-Roman mythology and Roman history. Boccaccio's biography of Zenobia is an almost exact reproduction of the *Historia Augusta*'s text. Boccaccio's aim is to surpass his model. Accordingly, his portrayal of Zenobia and her accomplishments is even more

colourful than that of the *Historia Augusta*. While the late classical anthology meticulously describes Odainat hunting “lions and panthers and bears and other beasts of the forest,”⁴⁴ Boccaccio’s text refers this passage to Zenobia herself, who knew how to hunt and kill “stags, deer, bears, wild boars, leopards and lions.”⁴⁵

At the other end of Europe and only a few years later, Geoffrey Chaucer recycled the episode, which had gained fame through Boccaccio, for his *Canterbury Tales*. Under the heading “The Monk’s Tale,” writing in the fourteenth century, the father of English literature collects seventeen short stories about tragic heroes from the Old Testament, classical antiquity and the more recent past. “Cenobia” stands here in a row with characters such as Lucifer, Samson, Nebuchadnezzar, Hercules, Julius Caesar and Pedro of Castile. “From hir childhede I fynde that she fledde / Office of women,” Chaucer introduces the portrait of this “myghty queene.”⁴⁶ What follows is practically a translation of Boccaccio’s Latin prose into English verse, though with a completely different intention. For Chaucer, Zenobia exemplifies the medieval concept of tragedy. The queen is first blessed with good luck and then led into ruin with brutal force. The wheel of fortune, the *rota fortunae*, has completed its cycle:⁴⁷

And she that helmed was in starke shoures
 And wan by force townes stronge and toures
 Shal on hir heed now were a vitremyte,
 And she that bar the ceptre ful of floures
 Shal bere a distaf, hir costes for to quyte.

In 1625, a young author from Madrid, Calderón de la Barca, published a historical drama with the title *La gran Zenobia*. Unlike Boccaccio and Chaucer, Calderón uses the Zenobia story only as an anchor for a drama, which is really about universal themes: power, revenge, betrayal, fate and the relationship of men and women. He freely modified the literary model and invented a story about Zenobia when she was captured and deported to Italy.

In the seventeenth century, classical narratives became a source of inspiration for operas too. The close relationship of this musical genre, which had originated in Italy, with classical antiquity is hardly surprising. After all, the pioneers of the opera – the composers of the *Camerata Florentina* and, later, Claudio Monteverdi in particular – were firmly convinced that they had found the key to reviving ancient drama. Popular topics for libretti were taken from adaptations of ancient mythology and history. The librettists were insatiable, as was the market, and constantly in search of new themes and characters. The Zenobia episode, with its dramatic and colourful exoticism, was premium material for the opera house. In 1694 – only a couple of years after the British expedition led by William Halifax had visited Palmyra and sent its reports to Europe⁴⁸ – the Venetian Giovanni Albinoni was the first to turn the story into an opera: *Zenobia, regina de’ Palmireni*. The libretto was written by Antonio Marchi. Like many operas of the period, Albinoni’s *Zenobia* adds completely fictitious characters and events to the story in order to enhance its dramatic effects. Characteristically, Marchi also

concentrated on a section of the whole story in order to make the material more suitable for the stage, while complying with the Aristotelian units of action, space and time. From a musical point of view, the opera offers battle sounds and martial drumming, but no local colour to suggest that the action takes place in the Near East. It was not until thirty years later that the Neapolitan composer Leonardo Leo put on stage a *Zenobia in Palmira* (1725). By the end of the century, the theme had still not lost its attractiveness. In the 1780s, the writer Gaetano Sertor wrote a libretto focusing on the heartbreaking story of Publia, a fictitious daughter of Gallienus, who was first taken prisoner by the Persians, then by the Palmyrenes and finally freed by Aurelian. Pasquale Anfossi and Giovanni Paisiello, two heavyweights in the contemporary musical scene, composed operas based on the libretto. Anfossi premiered *Zenobia di Palmira* in Bologna in 1789, Paisiello his *Zenobia in Palmira* the year after in Naples. Once again, the music is devoid of any extra-European elements. Instead, both operas fully stand in the tradition of the First Viennese School. This is also true of the last musical drama that takes up the theme of Zenobia: Rossini's opera *Aureliano*, premiered in 1813. Again, the opera is composed around a fictional love story between Zenobia and the Persian prince Arsace. The scenery with the Euphrates, assorted high priests and a temple of Isis is conspicuously oriental, but the music makes no attempt at authenticity. Instead of evoking otherness through the sounds of janissaries and the use of the appropriate instruments – like Mozart's *Abduction from the Seraglio* – the musical language is one of imperial splendour reminding rather of *La clemenza di Tito*.

In a sense, Rossini's *Aureliano* came too late. With the French Revolution, opera composers turned their attention to new themes, while classical antiquity lost its function as the universal role model. In literature, however, Zenobia and Palmyra enjoyed ongoing popularity, which was also due to the increasing attractiveness of western Asia as a travel destination for Europeans and Americans. In 1836, the American writer and preacher William Ware published an epistolary novel called *Zenobia, or the Fall of Palmyra*, and a year after the sequel, *Aurelian*. The novels, which intend to create suspense through detailed descriptions of military operations, depict Palmyra as a Near Eastern counter-world to Rome, as the fundamental Other. The oasis city is hardly more than an exotic setting in the detective novel *Ou è Zénobie?* written by the French best-seller author Fortuné Du Boisgobey (1880). In the twentieth century, western audiences' interest in such literary effusions evaporated rapidly. The one exception is Judith Weingarten's novel *The Chronicle of Zenobia*, which takes, as expected, a feminist stance (2006).

In painting, Zenobia and Palmyra also enjoyed great popularity in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The first to see the topic's potential was none other than Giovanni Battista Tiepolo. More than one of his paintings were inspired by Palmyra's great moment in history: most importantly, he portrayed Zenobia in the moment of the submission to Aurelian (*Il trionfo di Aureliano*, 1717) and standing on a pedestal as she speaks to her soldiers (*La regina Zenobia arringa i soldati*, 1725–1730). In both cases, Tiepolo makes Zenobia the main figure of the picture, reducing all the others, even Aurelian, to extras. Only partially does Tiepolo

follow the narrative of the *Historia Augusta*. When she addresses her soldiers, the amazon-like Palmyrene is wearing military gear with a breastplate, a purple coat and a helmet, but her complexion is anything but dark, rather fashionably pale. The Palmyrene soldiers with their standards and eagles in this picture do not differ significantly from the Romans pulling Zenobia before Aurelian in the other. An image of classical beauty is the life-size statue *Zenobia in Chains*, first presented by the British sculptor Harriet Hosmer in London in 1859. The statue attracted crowds when displayed in the United States in 1864, but it soon fell into oblivion until it was auctioned at Sotheby's for nearly £200,000 in 2007.⁴⁹ Still rather innocent and almost timid, Edward Poynter's *Zenobia Captive* glances past the beholder, wrapped in splendid oriental garment. In 1888, the German-British painter Herbert Schmalz, who belonged to the school of the Pre-Raphaelites, painted an altogether different Desert Queen: *Zenobia's Last Look on Palmyra* is a picture full of gloom. In the background, the sun sets over a burning Palmyra whose richly ornamented fantastic architecture unmistakably shows the traces of fighting. The gaze of the queen, tied with golden handcuffs, glides over the battlefield of her defeat. A few years later, in 1897, the Duchess of Devonshire dressed up as Zenobia when visiting a London mask ball. The duchess played it safe: so deep had the image of the captured queen sunk into collective memory. But the fame of Zenobia soon faded. While academics became obsessed with Palmyra, western art and literature were no longer interested in the oasis city.⁵⁰ An Italian attempt to make Zenobia the heroine of a sword and sandal movie failed grotesquely (*Nel segno di Roma*, 1958).

Completely different was the situation in Syria itself, where Baathist Arab nationalism, soon after the party had been established in 1940, discovered Zenobia as a canvas for its political mythology. At the heart of this mythology was the fictitious assumption that Syria had been inhabited, since time immemorial, by an Arab population, and that the present and this distant past were connected through an unbroken tradition. Accordingly, Zenobia became the Arab queen of an Arab city. The story about the ruler, and the revolt she had allegedly instigated against Rome, had exactly the substance the founding fathers of the young state were looking for: Zenobia was a heroine from the heart of the country, who had challenged a European great power, as David once had challenged Goliath. The catchiest version of the Zenobia legend has been turned into a narrative by Mustafa Tlass, a Baathist politician and general, who served as Syria's Minister of Defence from 1972 to 2005 and was, for decades, the right hand of both Assads, father and son. His book *Zenobia. Queen of Tadmor* tells the story of the freedom-loving Palmyrene Arabs, who, led by Zenobia, defy the Roman Empire's brutal despotism. Behind Rome, the mandate powers of Great Britain and France are clearly visible. Who cared about the political and ethnic complexities of ancient Syria? What mattered was that Zenobia could be reinvented as the champion of an Arab nation that was not founded on Islam and was, therefore, also able to include the non-Muslim communities in Syria, including those whom the orthodox Islam of the Sunna regarded as heretics: Christians, Alawites, Druze, Jews.

Ancient Palmyra suited the triad of “Unity – Freedom – Socialism,” promoted by the Baath Party’s ideologues, better than anything from a later period in the history of the Levant.

After Syria had left the union with Egypt in 1961 and Hafiz al-Assad had come to power in November 1970, Palmyra and Zenobia became index fossils of Baathist ideology. The ruined city and a woman’s head found in Palmyra, which had long been regarded as a representation of Zenobia, came to decorate bank-notes and stamps. Zenobia became the protagonist of TV series, theatre plays and even a musical premiered by the Lebanese composer Mansour Rahbani in 2007. Only Saladin, the Sultan of Syria and founder of the Ayyubid dynasty, was celebrated more fervently by the Assad regime than Zenobia. After all, he had driven the crusaders out of Jerusalem. In 2008, just before the outbreak of the civil war, Bashar al-Assad allowed Albinoni’s opera to be staged in Damascus. What no-one knew back then: Albinoni’s baroque arias were the swan song of the young Syrian nation-state seeking legitimacy in its distant past.

Notes

- 1 Above, p. 157–58.
- 2 Eutr. 9,24; Fest. 25,1; Oros. 7,25,9.
- 3 Eutr. 9,25.
- 4 Karin Mosig-Walburg, *Römer und Perser. Vom 3. Jahrhundert bis zum Jahr 363 n. Chr.* (Gutenberg: Computus, 2009), 125–30.
- 5 Greg Fisher, *Between Empires. Arabs, Romans, and Sasanians in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2011), 22.
- 6 Ibid., 49–71; Denis Genequand, “The archaeological evidence for the Jafnids and the Naşrids,” in *Arabs and Empires before Islam*, ed. Greg Fisher (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2015); Michael Macdonald, “Arabs and empires before the sixth century,” *ibid.* On al-Ḥīra now Isabel Toral-Niehoff, *Al-Ḥīra. Eine arabische Kulturmetropole im spätantiken Kontext*, vol. 104, Islamic history and civilization (Leiden: Brill, 2014), esp. 59–74.
- 7 On the northern section of the *Strata Diocletiana* Michaela Konrad, Hans Roland Baldus and Thilo Ulbert, *Der spätrömische Limes in Syrien. Archäologische Untersuchungen an den Grenzkastellen von Sura, Tetrapyrgium, Cholle und in Resafa*, ed. Deutsches Archäologisches Institut. Römisch-Germanische Kommission, vol. 5, Resafa (Mainz: P. von Zabern, 2001).
- 8 CIL III 6661. On the Camp of Diocletian cf. the overview by Michał Gawlikowski, “Tempel, Gräber und Kasernen. Die polnischen Ausgrabungen im Diokletianslager,” in *Palmyra. Kulturbegegnung im Grenzbereich*, ed. Andreas Schmidt-Colinet (Mainz: Philipp von Zabern, 2005).
- 9 This is suggested by the layout of the parade ground. Cf. Karol Juchniewicz, “Late Roman fortifications in Palmyra,” *Studia Palmyrénskie* 12 (2013): 194.
- 10 For a tentative dating Marianne Tabaczek, *Zwischen Stoa und Suq. Die Säulenstraßen im Vorderen Orient in römischer Zeit unter besonderer Berücksichtigung von Palmyra*. Diss. Phil. Köln: Universität zu Köln, 2002, 35–36.
- 11 The hypothesis has been promoted by Rudolf Fellmann, “Der Palast der Königin Zenobia,” in *Palmyra. Geschichte, Kunst und Kultur der syrischen Oasenstadt*, ed. Erwin Maria Ruprechtsberger. Linzer Archäologische Forschungen (Linz: Druck- und Verlagsanstalt Gutenberg, 1987).

- 12 Tabaczek, *Zwischen Stoa und Suq*, 47.
- 13 PAT 1608.
- 14 On this and on the following Michael Sommer, "Palmyra," *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum* 26 (2014).
- 15 Erwin Maria Ruprechtsberger, "Palmyra in spätantiker, oströmischer (byzantinischer) und frühislamischer Zeit," in *Geschichte, Kunst und Kultur der syrischen Oasenstadt*, ed. Erwin Maria Ruprechtsberger, Linzer Archäologische Forschungen (Linz: Druck- und Verlagsanstalt Gutenberg, 1987), 146.
- 16 Yet Joh. Mal. chron. 18,152 claims that Justinian's *comes orientis*, a certain Patricius Armenius, restored the city's churches. There is no archaeological evidence for such works having been carried out.
- 17 Fergus Millar, "Paul of Samosata, Zenobia, and Aurelian. The Church, local culture, and political allegiance in third-century Syria," *Journal of Roman Studies* 61 (1971).
- 18 On 2 *Chronicles* 8:4 confusing Tamar for Tadmor, above, p. 24.
- 19 V. Alex. Acoim. 35.
- 20 Prok. aed. 2,11,10–12. Probably the Byzantine historiographer exaggerates beyond limits. It is possible that the fourth century infrastructure was repaired under Justinian. Cf. Juchniewicz, "Late Roman fortifications," 195. On Procopius' representation of the Persian wars Henning Börm, *Prokop und die Perser. Untersuchungen zu den römisch-sasanidischen Kontakten in der ausgehenden Spätantike* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 2007).
- 21 Henning Börm "Der Perserkönig im Imperium Romanum. Chosroes I. und der sasani-dische Einfall in das Oströmische Reich 540 n. Chr.," *Chiron* 36 (2006).
- 22 Hugh Kennedy, *The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphates. The Islamic Near East from the Sixth to the Eleventh Century* (London: Longman, 1986), 2; Ignacio Arce, "Severan castra, Tetrarchic quadriburgia, Justinian coenobia, and Ghassanid diyarat. Patterns of transformation of *limes Arabicus* forts during Late Antiquity," in *Roman Military Architecture on the Frontiers. Armies and Their Architecture in Late Antiquity*, ed. Rob Collins, Matthew Symonds and Meike Weber (Oxford: Oxbow, 2015).
- 23 Hugh Kennedy, "The last century of Byzantine Syria. A reinterpretation," *Byzantinische Forschungen* 10 (1985).
- 24 On this and the following Kennedy, *Prophet*, 1–14.
- 25 Kennedy, "The impact of Muslim rule on the pattern of rural settlement in Syria," in *La Syrie de Byzance à l'Islam, VIIe–VIIIe siècles*, ed. Pierre Canivet and Jean-Paul Rey-Coquais (Damas: Institut français de Damas, 1992), 292.
- 26 Ross Burns, *Damascus. A History* (London: Routledge, 2005), 108–29.
- 27 Hugh Kennedy, "From polis to Madina. Urban change in Late Antique and Early Islamic Syria," *Past and Present* 106 (1985): 16; "Impact," 297; Barbara Finster, "Anjar. Spätantik oder frühislamisch?" in *Residences, Castles, Settlements. Transformation Processes from Late Antiquity to Early Islam in Bilad al-Sham*, ed. Karin Bartl and Abd al-Razzaq Moaz, Orient-Archäologie (Rahden/Westfalen: Verlag Marie Leidorf, 2009).
- 28 See now the excellent in-depth study by Denis Genequand, *Les établissements des élites Omeyyades en Palmyrène et au Proche-Orient*, vol. 200, Bibliothèque archéologique et historique (Beyrouth: Institut français du Proche-Orient, 2012), which chronologically and geographically covers the whole range. On Umayyad investments cf. Kennedy, "Impact."
- 29 Kennedy, "Impact," 294f.; Genequand, *Établissement*, 200, 95–192.
- 30 Tabaczek, *Zwischen Stoa und Suq*, 24–27; Genequand, *Établissement*, 200, 46–49.
- 31 Denis Genequand, "De Rome à l'Islam. Recherches récentes sur le dit Caesareum de Palmyre," *Studia Palmyrénskie* 12 (2013): 102.
- 32 On the following Michael Sommer, "Through the looking glass. Zenobia and 'Orientalism,'" in *Reinventing 'the Invention of Tradition'? Indigenous Past and the Roman Present*, ed. Dietrich Boschung, Alexandra W. Busch and Miguel John Versluys, Morphomata (Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink, 2015).

- 33 Hist. Aug. tyr. trig. 30,1.
- 34 Ibid., 30,3.
- 35 Ibid., 30,4–12.
- 36 Ibid., 30,12–22.
- 37 Ibid., 30,23–27.
- 38 Hist. Aug. Aurel. 22,1.
- 39 Ibid., 27,1–3.
- 40 Zos. 1,39.
- 41 At-Tabarī ann. 1,364f. Cf. Toral-Niehoff, *Al-Ḥīra*, 104, 49–50.
- 42 Ibid., 50.
- 43 Cf. Michael Dallapiazza, “Zenobia,” in *Historische Gestalten der Antike. Rezeption in Literatur, Kunst und Musik*, ed. Peter von Möllendorff, Annette Simonis and Linda Simonis, Der neue Pauly. Supplemente (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler, 2013).
- 44 Hist. Aug. tyr. trig. 15,7.
- 45 Boccaccio clar. mul. 95.
- 46 Chaucer, “The Monk’s Tale” 367–68; 459.
- 47 Ibid. 481–86: “And she that, armed, rode where grim battle lowers / And took by force great cities and strong towers, / Must wear a cap now while her two eyes weep; / And she that bore the sceptre of carved flowers / May bear a distaff and thus earn her keep.”
- 48 Above, p. 2–3.
- 49 Rex Winsbury, *Zenobia of Palmyra. History, Myth and the Neo-Classical Imagination* (London: Duckworth, 2010), 11.
- 50 On the history of research above, p. 1–8.

10 The end of civilization

Palmyra's second downfall in the Syrian civil war

As of April 2017, the death toll of the civil war in Syria stands at over 250,000; millions are on the run, and an end to the atrocities is not in sight. Even if the conflict parties can agree on peace one day, Syria's future is uncertain. Its society is torn to pieces, foreign powers are muscling in on the conflict. The so-called Islamic State appears to have passed its zenith, but the terrorist militias still control large parts of eastern Syria. In the crossroads of terror in Syria and in the neighbouring state of Iraq lies humanity's cultural heritage, which is mutilated, blasted, demolished and destroyed by neglect.

Between the frontlines

One of the concomitant manifestations of globalization is the fact that even supposedly isolated, insignificant events may achieve worldwide impact, often covering huge distances at breathtaking speed and with enormous force. On 17 December 2010, the greengrocer Mohammed Bouazizi publicly set fire to himself in the Tunisian town of Ben Arous as a protest against the authorities' despotism under the dictatorship of Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali. Bouazizi's suicide was the catalyst which precipitated the tense atmosphere in the country into an open revolution. Starting from Tunisia, the wave of rage inundated the entire Arab world. The "Arab Spring," as the revolt has been optimistically labelled, ate up its way through the Maghreb, reaching Egypt and the Arabian Peninsula, Jordan, Iraq, the Palestinian autonomous regions, Lebanon and lastly, at the beginning of 2011, Syria.

The students' protests in Damascus were the prelude to countrywide demonstrations, which were to be followed by ever-escalating violence on the streets. On 15 March, several opposition members marched through Damascus' historical city centre crying out slogans of freedom. A few days later, a crowd gathered outside the Home Office, demanding the release of political prisoners. The political leadership reacted promptly, though inconsistently. Placed under considerable pressure by the international community, the Assad regime withdrew from the one-party system, promised to lift the state of emergency in force since the 1960s, and announced reforms to the decrepit political system. At the same time, however, the dictator hoped to overcome the crisis relying on what had

been, for decades, the proven expedient of his family's rule: brutal repression. A wave of arrests rolled over the country. Countless people disappeared, as usual, in the torture chambers of the secret police, others were bludgeoned in public by Assad's loyalists.¹

In August 2011, the opposition responded by founding the Syrian National Council (*al-majlis al-Waṭanī as-Sūrī*) in Istanbul. Weeks earlier, the Free Syrian Army (*al-jaysh as-Sūrī al-Ḥurr*) had been set up, mainly by deserting soldiers of the Syrian armed forces. From spring 2012 on, the opposition against the regime started to become better organized. The results did not take long: army posts were occupied, tanks captured, helicopters shot down, prisoners taken. The demand for more civil liberties had already turned into a request for a fundamental change in politics. Indeed, the rapidly increasing numbers of makeshift commissions and committees revealed the hopeless disunity of the opposition. This was made up of various groups, which could practically agree on nothing else but calling for an overthrow of Assad's rule.

The spectrum of the opposition was a true reflection of the conflicts inherent in Syrian society. Religious forces rivalled with secular ones, Christians with Muslims, Arabs with Kurds, Conservatives with Socialists. However, an important section of Syrian society kept firm its loyalty to Assad: the Alawite minority, to which Assad's own family belongs. With only a few exceptions, the Alawites closed ranks with the dictator while the conflict grew worse. As political conflicts increasingly overlapped with religious and ethnic ones, the Shiites were also largely thrust onto the regime's side. Syrian Orthodox Christians, on the other hand, complained as early as spring 2012 about "ethnic cleansing" perpetuated by Sunni insurgents. No wonder that most of the religious minorities in the country to date feel safer in Assad's dictatorship than in the country wished for by the Sunni-dominated opposition.

Similar to the well-known dynamics of the post-Yugoslavian civil wars, armed conflicts erupted first in those places where hostile groups lived tightly close together. Consequently, fighting concentrated especially in the bigger cities in the south and west of the country, mainly in the Damascus area, in Homs, Hama and Aleppo. The collateral damages of the bloodbath included the ever-increasing dead, the wounded, the fleeing civilians and the loss of irretrievable cultural assets. Numerous UNESCO World Heritage Sites, such as the old town centres of Damascus and Aleppo, the Krak des Chevaliers, the Dead Cities in North Syria and the ruins of the ancient city of Bosra, were damaged or destroyed.

The sparsely populated centre and east of Syria remained relatively peaceful for a while. In this part of the country, along the Euphrates and its tributaries, lie the settlement areas of the Sunnis. Palmyra, the only large settlement in the midst of the Syrian Desert, also stayed, for a long time, untouched by the civil war and its front lines. This only changed in 2012, when a group calling itself *jamā'at al-tawḥīd wa al-jihād*, made its appearance in the Syrian theatre of war. It had been founded in 1999 in Iraq by the Islamist Abū Muṣ'ab az-Zarqāwī ("Father of Musab from Zarqa"), whose real name was Aḥmad Fāḍil al-Nazāl al-Ḥalā'il, after his release from a Jordanian prison. In no time, the group had become a subsidiary

of al-Qaeda. After Zarqāwī's death in 2006, his jihadist group joined forces with other organisations, forming the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI). Their main geographic interest lay in Sunni-settled north-west Iraq, their target was easy to guess: the US troops were to be driven out of Iraq, the country was to be turned into a Sunni-Islamic theocracy, a new "caliphate."

Until 2009, ISI was steadily losing ground in Iraq, notably because the US army and the Iraqi government had started to arm the clans in the north-west. Although ISI militants perpetrated a few sensational attacks in the Baghdad area, the organization suffered from a high death rate of its top leaders, while the US troops and Iraqi government pushed harder and harder.

The turning point in ISI's fortunes came unexpectedly with the death of its leading duo Abū Aiyūb al-Maṣri and Abū 'Umar al-Baġdādī during an Iraqi-American operation on 18 April 2010. A few weeks later, on 16 May, the terrorist organization announced the name of its new leader, Ibrahim Awwad Ibrahim al-Badri, who called himself Abū Bakr al-Baġdādī, birth date 1971. Hardly anything is known about the publicity-shy jihadist's background. Al-Baġdādī probably studied Islamic law and the Quran, working for a time as a cleric before being promoted in 2007 as the Sharia commissioner of the Iraqi al-Qaeda. Under al-Baġdādī's leadership, ISI substantially expanded its terrorist activities in Iraq. Particularly after Osama bin Laden was shot by a US squad in Pakistan on 2 May 2011, scarcely a day passed in Iraq without car-bomb explosions, suicide attacks or jail assaults to free fellow terrorists.

Taking advantage of an enfeebled Assad rule, by the end of 2011, ISI set up its own branch in the neighbouring country: the Salafist al-Nusra Front (*Jabhat an-Nuṣra*, "Supporting front for the people of aš-Šām" – the Arabic word aš-Šām referring to the area known in the West as "Levant"). Its leader Abū Muḥammad al-Jawlānī addressed the public in January 2012 with a video message. The al-Nusra Front took responsibility for attacks in Damascus and Aleppo, targeting mainly members and facilities of the government army. The Islamists' military potential soared. Syrian opposition members guessed that by the end of 2012, al-Nusra numbered between 6,000 and 10,000 armed fighters.² The group has adapted the form of its organization to the circumstances prevalent in each part of the country: while operating underground in Damascus, it employs paramilitary units elsewhere. Already in the early stages, it was classified by the US as a terrorist organisation. Its relationship to the more secular factions of the Syrian opposition is ambivalent. Al-Nusra rejects the National Council as being controlled by foreign countries, but it collaborates time and again with the Free Syrian Army against Assad's regime.

Rifts between the Islamic State and al-Nusra became apparent in April 2013, when Abū Bakr declared in a video message that ISI and the Front would merge into one organization under his sole leadership. Al-Jawlānī, on the other hand, held on to the independence of his group. However, there was little he could do against the pull of ISI's terrorist brand. His competitors simply lured away his fighters, who were now gathering under Abū Bakr's black banner. Rapidly, the "Islamic state" became a political factor in Syria, as it quickly approached its goal

to revise the borders created by the Mandate Powers after the First World War. Accordingly, the organization changed its name to *ad-daula al-islāmīya fī-l- 'Irāq wa-š-Šām*, which roughly translates into English as “Islamic State of Iraq and aš-Šām.” Western commentators have since been speaking of IS (“Islamic State”) or ISIS (“Islamic State of Iraq and Syria”).³

With the takeover of Abū Bakr, the strategy of the Islamists fighting in Syria changed, too. While the al-Nusra Front, in an alliance with other rebel organizations, had primarily aimed at putting an end to the reign of Bashar al-Assad and his clan, the Islamic State’s purpose was to build up proto- and in the long run full-scale governmental structures. On the territories of Iraq and Syria – and possibly other states in the region – a modern “caliphate” is to be created, whose subjects will have to follow a literal interpretation of the Quran. In Abū Bakr’s fundamentalist vision of Islam, there is, of course, no place for differently-minded Muslims and the believers of other faiths. Christians and Yazidis, as well as Shiites, Alawites and secular Sunnis, are exposed to massive persecutions where the black flag of ISIS flies. They risk harassment at best, in many cases expulsion, forced conversion or a cruel death. Time and again, executions of captured soldiers of government forces and of civilians, including many who have been kidnapped, attract the international cyber-community’s attention. The victims are often beheaded in front of the camera in a degrading display of cruelty.

Where ISIS is heading could first be observed in ar-Raqqa, a city of about 200,000 inhabitants, located near the confluence of the river Balīḥ and the Euphrates. Ancient Tuttul, which had been known as Kallinikon since the Hellenistic period, had always been a strategically important city for which the great powers had struggled bitterly: Romans, Byzantines, Persians, Arabs and Ottomans. In ar-Raqqa, which housed some 800,000 refugees from other parts of Syria, the Free Syrian Army had initially prevailed. The main battlefield between the Assad Army and opposition forces was a large military base near ar-Raqqa. Since August 2013, excluding the military base, which fell only a year later, the city has been under the control of the Islamic State. Since then, ISIS has turned ar-Raqqa into its capital. “Government” officials take care of food supplies for the population. They are able to do this because ISIS controls the grain and olive cultivation areas to the north of ar-Raqqa. Sharia courts watch over the observance of Islamic law. They condemn criminals as well as opposition members, and people who do not follow the Islamic laws and prohibitions. A “religious police” patrols through the city district and monitors the observance of Islamic morals. Schools reopened, but were immediately transformed into centres of Islamist indoctrination. Around ar-Raqqa, ISIS launched an unprecedented propaganda campaign: pamphlets and a wide range of new media are constantly inundating the local population with messages of radical Islam, including hatred of “unbelievers” and members of non-Sunni currents of Islam.

The “cultural policy” of the new masters in ar-Raqqa also includes the redesign of the cityscape in terms of a fundamentalist interpretation of Islam. Immediately after their takeover, the Islamists burned the interiors of Christian churches. The cathedral of the Armenian community still serves ISIS as its headquarters.

In February 2015, bulldozers destroyed the colossal statue of a lion which was part of a gateway from the Neo-Assyrian period and originated from nearby Arslan Taş. The systematic destruction of a millennia-old cultural heritage was by no means confined to the “capital” of the so-called state. After the Islamic State had brought the Iraqi city of Mosul under its control, here, too, mosques and churches, but Islamic shrines as well, were razed to the ground using bulldozers or explosives. On the internet, videos emerged showing ISIS activists shattering statues from Hatra with sledgehammers.

With its campaign against the cultural heritage of the region, the terrorist militia pursues several objectives at once. Like many religions originating in the Near East, and similarly to Judaism and Christianity, Islam has an anti-iconic bias. Like the Bible, the Quran does not contain a general prohibition of images. However, it categorically prohibits idolatry (*širk*) and the worship of images, as well as religious offerings (*tāgūt*), which was a common practice in all polytheistic cults. In general, sacred art in Islam renounces pictorial representations. In some periods, however, the radical interpretation of the Quran passages in question led to general iconoclasm, especially against non-Muslim images. This happened, for instance, under the Moghul rulers in India, who were confronted with the iconography of other religions, mainly Hinduism. In Iran, after the Islamic revolution, the local population could only just prevent the destruction of Persepolis by a fanatical mob. The activities of Islamic militia in Afghanistan and Pakistan have preceded the destructions of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. In 2001, the Afghan Taliban destroyed the colossal Buddha statues of Bamiyan. In 2007, Islamists also blew up several Buddha statues in north-west Pakistan.

The deliberate destruction of cultural heritage is staged for an Islamic audience in the first instance. For fundamentalist Muslims, the destruction of images which are denounced as *širk* and *tāgūt*, is an act agreeable to God. In its glossy internet magazine “Dabiq,” the Islamic State boasted about its destruction of the statues of Nineveh in Iraq. Like the patriarch Ibrahim (Abraham) had done at one time, the *mujāhidīn* had smashed the idols of the Assyrians, a *širk* nation, and thus proved their ineffectiveness (suras 6:74, 21: 52–58, 37: 88–96). The outcry among the enemies of the Prophet was great, but the *mujāhidīn* did not care about the feelings of the unbelievers (*kuffār*).⁴

In the West, such warlike voices are often dismissed as pure propaganda, and they are believed to be targeted solely on the external world. However, pronouncements of this kind are taken seriously in the Islamic world. While official representatives of Islam often hasten to condemn such acts of barbarism committed against the cultural heritage as blasphemous, the majority of the Muslim population is mostly indifferent to the legacy of a pre-Islamic past, which is perceived by some of them as a period of “ignorance.” There are many who see in the images of long gone cultures the expression of idolatry and sinfulness. If the brave *mujāhidīn* of the Islamic State start enforcing the commandments of the Prophet, then many regard this with a certain satisfaction. Sayyid Qutb, an Egyptian executed in 1966 and one of the most influential thinkers of Islamic fundamentalism, drew the parallel between pre-Islamic “ignorance” and the “ignorance” that had become

widespread across the Islamic world due to secularization since the 1950s.⁵ Such physical and verbal gesticulation, therefore, targets all those in the region, who do not consider Islam as the only source of their political and cultural identity. When the terrorists destroy the legacy of a distant past – from Nineveh to Palmyra, from the churches of Mosul to the shrines of Islamic martyrs – they want to shatter the imaginary foundations of modern states like Syria or Iraq. The excesses of violence intimidate their adversaries and they deprive local societies of images onto which identity concepts that go beyond Islam may be projected in the future.

From the point of view of the Islamists, targeting a western audience with their iconoclasm transmitted into the world via YouTube is only a second priority. To be sure, barbaric violence unleashed against innocent stones is supposed to convince the audience on the screen of the determination of the terrorists. At the same time, western media, academics and politicians are meant to be deprived of their credibility. If they complain about the rage of destruction, Islamic audiences are told that the West is merely interested in “a few stones,” that western media are indifferent to the suffering of the people.⁶ Especially for members of the Muslim diaspora in Europe and America, setting the humanitarian disasters off against the cultural ones is highly effective. Finally, the calculated barbarism is also part of a perverse advertising campaign, with which the Islamic State wants to promote artefacts from the looted archaeological sites to customers across the world. As a consequence of their iconoclasm, places like Nineveh, Hatra and Palmyra become the focal points of public interest, resulting in last-minute panic among unscrupulous collectors in Europe, America, China and elsewhere. The sellout of the region’s cultural heritage on a booming black market is a major source of funding for the Islamic state, especially in times of shrinking oil revenues.

Finis Palmyrae?

In mid-May 2015, the eyes of the world’s public were on Palmyra, when fighters of the Islamic State came within reach of the desert city. “We have to save Palmyra, or the maniacs will raze civilization,” wrote the then Mayor of London, Boris Johnson, in the *Daily Telegraph*. With strong words, Johnson summoned the global community to stand up for the cultural heritage under threat in Palmyra.⁷ A few days later, on 21 May, ISIS troops captured the strategically important city with its airfield and high-security prison from the Assad troops. Under ISIL’s control came not only the approximately 70,000 inhabitants of the modern city of Tadmur and thousands who had taken refuge there, but also the ruins of ancient Palmyra. The rule of the Islamic State in Palmyra started with a grim demonstration of its power, with dozens of Syrian soldiers being publicly executed. There was little doubt that sooner or later, ISIS would move the focus of their work of destruction to Palmyra’s World Heritage site.

A taste of what was to follow was the destruction of the so-called “Lion of Allat.” The statue, found in fragments in 1977 by Polish archaeologists, had later been reassembled. The 3.5-metre-tall, 15-ton colossus of limestone, at whose feet lies a gazelle, represents the companion of the goddess Allat, who was worshipped

in the Temple of Allat, later to be incorporated into the Camp of Diocletian. On 3 July, the Roman theatre became a creepy backdrop for another execution. On 19 August, the self-styled warriors of God killed the longtime director of Palmyra's museum and head of the Antiquities Administration, Ḥālīd al-As'ad, who had worked towards the site's protection until the end. They accused the 82-year-old of collaboration with the Assad regime and of cooperation with "infidels." The terrorist organization's henchmen decapitated the archaeologist in front of the museum, his lifetime achievement, and then displayed the corpse at the Tetrapylon.⁸ Four days later, they used explosives to transform the Temple of Ba'al-Šamen into a heap of rubble.⁹ Again a week later, on 30 August 2015, the largest sanctuary of Palmyra, the Temple of Bēl, fell victim to the terrorists' destructive fury. Of the cella, only the massive monumental portal resisted the detonation. In September, ISIS fighters destroyed several of the tower tombs in the western necropolis, the so-called Valley of the Tombs, including the tower of 'Elabel, the best preserved of all the tomb towers.¹⁰ In October, they continued their work with the destruction of the monumental arch connecting the central and the eastern sections of the colonnaded street.

In 2016, the Islamic state came under pressure on several fronts, mainly through the intervention of Russian forces. After the city had already been attacked several times by Syrian and Russian aircraft, the Syrian army loyal to Assad regained Palmyra after violent street fighting on March 27, having taken the surrounding hilltops in the weeks before. Russian soldiers moved into Palmyra to clear the city of weapons and explosives. In the ruins, a total of 4,000 dynamite charges were dismantled. On 5 May, the orchestra of St. Petersburg's Mariinsky Theatre, under the direction of Valeri Gergiev, a Putin intimate, performed works by Prokofiev, Shchedrin and Bach in Palmyra's Roman theatre. Vladimir Putin addressed the audience with a recorded message, in which he called the ancient city that was just recaptured, a "sign of hope."¹¹ Ironically, the Islamic State's enemies, who had not quite covered themselves with glory protecting historical sites in Syria, now exploited Palmyra for their propagandistic purposes.

While Palmyra remained prominent in western media, there was increasing talk of the tolerance and cosmopolitanism that Palmyra, allegedly, was emblematic of.¹² While this makes for good headlines in newspapers, one should not forget that, in antiquity, there was no claim to exclusive religious truth. If, however, there is no religious orthodoxy, one cannot speak of religious tolerance either. Ancient empires, unlike modern nation states, had neither the need, nor the possibility of regulating and standardizing the culture and everyday life of the people living at their periphery. Modern nation states, by contrast, need to do this: it is one of the reasons why they exist. One can call this imperial *laissez-faire* "structural tolerance," as Jürgen Osterhammel has done.¹³ In practice, however, the ethnic and cultural pluralism that prevailed in empires, all the way from the Akkadian down to the Ottoman Empire, has less to do with tolerance than with the constraints which are applied by limited resources to large-scale rule.

Nonetheless, we can still learn a great deal from Rome and its relationship with the societies dwelling on its edge, including Palmyra. The lesson ancient Palmyra

teaches is that the Romans knew how to integrate a society so obviously different from their own into their Empire. They put to their service the ties which kept together local societies, won the tribal elites on their side and benefited, in multiple ways, from the Palmyrenes' loyalty and their wealth resulting from the long-distance trade. That they had wisely chosen their partners and methods of domination, which became apparent in AD 260 when a Palmyrene saved Rome's position in the Middle East. A few years later, however, when Zenobia grasped power, the limits of integration came to the surface. After Odainat's death, when it came to the question of power, it became obvious that the Palmyrene thinking in genealogical categories and Roman legal concepts were not compatible with one another.

Yet, the Empire probably provided a more suitable framework for a peaceful balance of interests than the modern nation state, which was imposed on the region by the Europeans as a result of the Conference of San Remo in 1920. In the absence of an imagined community, which could justifiably be called a nation, the nation state could only be kept alive artificially through brutal force applied by dubious dictators. Nowadays, owing to the equally brutal force of yet-worse terrorist organizations, it may be receiving its death blow. For the time being, the slaughter goes on, and it is not sparing Palmyra or its environs. In early December 2016, the front line approached the oasis once again, while government forces were focusing on their Aleppo offensive, thinning their troops elsewhere. This time, however, at least the civilians had been evacuated in time. The fighting for Palmyra lasted several days, until, on the evening of 11 December, the jihadists reported their recapturing of the oasis city. In February 2017, the Syrian military launched a counteroffensive, which reached the hilltops west of Palmyra by 1 March. By the evening of 2 March, the entire city was again in the hands of the Assad forces. In the weeks since 11 December 2016, further buildings of the ancient city have been destroyed or damaged: the Tetrastyle, which had been reconstructed in the 1960s, and parts of the (also reconstructed) theatre.

What does the future hold for Palmyra? Representatives of the Assad regime have declared that they intend to repair the damage as soon as possible and rebuild Palmyra. But what does this mean for a city that has been a field of ruins for over 1,000 years and bears the scars of many destructions? Should Palmyra, in a however pacified post-war Syria, become again a tourist magnet, where swarms of visitors wait to be entertained in an ancient Disney World, whose war wounds have been carefully effaced? Will tourists promenade through a town of ruins, recreated using 3D printing technology? Will it be the shrine for a restored dictatorship of the Assad clan? Will Zenobia's Palmyra become a place of pilgrimage for all those seeking legitimacy for a Syrian nation in a distant pre-Islamic past? Whatever the post-war period will hold for Palmyra, systematic archaeological research, for which, over the last 100 years, Palmyra has been an immensely fertile ground, belongs to the past. The site's neglect during the long years of conflict, even before the conquest by the Islamic State, has facilitated the destructive business of looters. Economic hardship has made treasure-digging and trafficking of artefacts the only strategy of survival for many. As a consequence, findings and their contexts, which were expected to be revealing lots about the city and

its history, have been irretrievably destroyed. Palmyra had been an overwhelmingly rich source of knowledge since its rediscovery by the Europeans in the seventeenth century. That it will never be so again is one of the many tragic consequences of this gruesome war.

Notes

- 1 Cf. Kristin Helberg, *Brennpunkt Syrien. Einblick in ein verschlossenes Land* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 2012), 243–47.
- 2 David Ignatius, “Al-Qaeda affiliate playing larger role in Syria rebellion,” *Washington Post*, 30 November 2012: www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/post-partisan/post/al-qaeda-affiliate-playing-larger-role-in-syria-rebellion/2012/11/30/203d06f4-3b2e-11e2-9258-ac7c78d5c680_blog.html?utm_term=.35673de17db3, retrieved 9 March 2017. Since then, al-Nusra’s strength has remained largely the same, cf. Mark Corcoran, “Islamist militant group Al Nusra re-emerging as key rebel faction fighting to overthrow Bashar al-Assad,” *ABC News*, 15 May 2015: www.abc.net.au/news/2015-05-15/jabhat-al-nusra-explainer/6473404, retrieved 9 March 2017.
- 3 Behnam T. Said, *Islamischer Staat. IS-Miliz, al-Qaida und die deutschen Brigaden*, 4th ed. (München: Beck, 2015), 68. In traditional Arab geography, the term Šām (“sun”) refers to the countries to the “left” of the rising sun – from the point of view of the Arabian Peninsula this means the Levant (Syria and Palestine).
- 4 Dabiq 8,22, cf. Michael Sommer, *Syria. Geschichte einer zerstörten Welt* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 2016), 183.
- 5 On the beginnings of a different understanding Annie Sartre and Maurice Sartre, *Palmyre. Vérités et légendes* (Paris: Perrin, 2016), 238–46.
- 6 As experienced by the author himself, after he published a background article in *Der Spiegel* online. Some entries in the discussion forum speak volumes: Michael Sommer, “Was der Welt verloren geht” (24 May 2015): www.spiegel.de/kultur/gesellschaft/is-bedroht-palmyra-nimrud-hatra-aufsatz-michael-sommer-a-1035171.html, retrieved 9 March 2017.
- 7 Boris Johnson in the *Daily Telegraph* (17 May 2015), www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/islamic-state/11611500/We-must-save-Palmyra-or-the-maniacs-will-raze-civilisation.html, retrieved 9 March 2017.
- 8 Andreas Schmidt-Colinet, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* 22 August 2015.
- 9 www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-34090536, retrieved 9 March 2017.
- 10 www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/09/isil-blows-ancient-tower-tombs-syria-palmyra-150904165833493.html, retrieved 9 March 2017.
- 11 www.br-klassik.de/aktuell/news-kritik/palmyra-konzert-gergiev-putin-syrien-is-102.html, retrieved 9 March 2017.
- 12 For instance Andreas Kilb, “Ein Tempel der Toleranz verschwindet,” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* 25 August 2015; Tim Whitmarsh, “Tolerant and multicultural, Palmyra stood for everything Isis hates,” www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/aug/25/palmyra-tolerant-multicultural-isis-ancient-city-migrants-savagery, retrieved 9 March 2017.
- 13 Jürgen Osterhammel, *Geschichtswissenschaft jenseits des Nationalstaats. Studien zu Beziehungsgeschichte und Zivilisationsvergleich* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2001), 223. But he admits that “structural tolerance” does not necessarily equate to “ideological tolerance.”

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